

22 November 2015 (Christ the King/Reign of Christ)  
Lafayette Presbyterian Church  
**“Stewards of Truth”**  
John 18:33-37

The truth we seek to prove is not always the truth we find. Sometimes we think we know more about a situation than we actually do, and we can jump to dangerous conclusions based on false assumptions. When I was in graduate school, I got word one day that a fellow student had dumped his girlfriend and had been really mean to her, and that she didn't deserve the way he had treated her. I had always thought he was a pretty nice guy, so it seemed out of character for him. But he and I weren't in the same department and I didn't know him that well. All I remember is that everyone was saying how awful so-and-so was for the way he had broken up with his girlfriend. And, since everyone was saying the same thing, we all assumed it was true. But what none of us knew until later was that it was a rumor started by another student who couldn't get this guy to go out with her. So to get back at him, she came up with a story to defame his character. There wasn't a grain of truth in it. I've often thought about that situation as a cautionary tale about destructive gossip and other undercurrents that live insidiously below the radar. How can we know if what we hear and see is the truth? Is the truth something you just sense, or is it something you have to work hard to seek with a skeptical mind?

In Jane Austen's classic comedy of manners, *Pride and Prejudice*, we have one of the best exposés ever written of how first impressions, wounded pride, and incorrect assumptions nearly derail a relationship between two people who were made for each other. That timeless tale, and the unfortunate situation I witnessed in graduate school, both suggest that truth may best and most enduringly be sought through our relationships. Put another way, truth seems to be less a series of propositions and facts, less a system of doctrine, than it is a reality continually tested and lived and discovered over time in the presence of God and in the company of other people. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about religious truth, scientific truth, or historical truth—truth is truth, and all truth is from God.

According to what we find in the Scriptures, the ultimate sovereignty of truth is what stands above all and reigns over all when we are at our most honest, our most real, our most loving, and our most authentic with each other and with God. On that definition, that is why Jesus emerges through the witness of the Gospels, and especially in John's Gospel, as the very embodiment of truth, sovereign over all—and that is why the early church began to develop this understanding of him as King and Lord, not because they saw him as a superhuman version of the Roman emperor, but because they experienced him as the one and only power before whom every evil threat melted away. In these days of violence and terror, is not the truth of Christ's reign as that kind of King exactly what our sorrowing, suffering world seeks? Is not the sovereignty of truth over lies, deception, and all our attempts to undermine each other, the most important witness and message we as the church of Jesus Christ have to offer the community around us?

Today's reading from the Gospel of John in which Jesus stands before Pilate and is about to be condemned hardly seems a likely text to celebrate kingship. In fact, it projects the very opposite of victory and triumph, and may leave us frustrated and confused as to why Jesus would not or could not take command of the situation. Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest and author of some of the best and most insightful reflections on the Christian life, wrote in 1990 a series of meditations on Jesus' journey to the cross, titled, *Walk With Jesus*. In that volume, here is how Nouwen sets the stage for our reading this morning from John Chapter 18:

*A man behind bars. He is condemned to death. He is put in the category of the "damned." He is no longer considered worthy to live. He has become the enemy, the rebel, the outsider, a danger to society. He has to be put away, cut out of the communal life.*

*Why? Because he is different. He is black, and blacks are dangerous. He is gay, and gays are perverts. He is a Jew, and Jews cannot be trusted. He is a refugee, and refugees are threats to our economy. He is an outsider, saying what we do not want to hear, and reminding us of what we would rather forget. He upsets our well-ordered lives. He tears aside the veil that covers our impurities and breaks down the walls that keep us safely separated. He says, "We belong to the same humanity, we are all children of the same God; we are all loved as God's favorite sons and daughters; we are all destined to live in the same home, with the same father, and eating together at the same table." He says, "Apartheid is not according to God's plan. Unity and communion are."*

*That voice has got to be silenced. It upsets the way we do things here. It disturbs our family life, our social life, our business life. It creates disorder, yes, even chaos. Life is complex enough as it is. We do not need prophets who destroy the delicate web of relationships we have so carefully worked out. Let us stick to the motto: Everyone for himself and God for us all. That way there is a minimum of pain and a maximum of comfort.*

Perhaps that is not what we want to hear. At the point at which Jesus stood before Pilate, his teachings were not what many people in power and authority wanted to hear. Those with means and position and rank and a stake in society did not want to change—why should they? They already had everything they needed. The religious authorities who wanted Jesus condemned had a lot to lose if Jesus was vindicated, but so did Pilate. If he could not verify that Jesus posed no threat to the existing secular order of the Roman Empire, he had no choice but to preside over Jesus' execution. How, we wonder, is this collision of power and values going to be resolved in the interests of truth? Nouwen goes on:

*Jesus stands before Pilate. He is silent. He does not defend himself against the many charges made against him. But when Pilate asks him, "What have you done?" he says, "I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and*

*all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice” (John 18:35-38). The truth of which Jesus speaks is not a thesis, or a doctrine, or an intellectual explanation of reality. It is the very relationship, the life-giving intimacy between himself and the Father of which he wants us to partake. Pilate could not hear that, nor can anyone who is not connected to Jesus. Anyone, however, who enters into communion with Jesus will receive the Spirit of truth – the Spirit who frees us from the compulsions and obsessions of our contemporary society, who makes us belong to God’s own inner life, and allows us to live in the world with open hearts and attentive minds. In communion with Jesus, we can hear the Spirit’s voice and journey far and wide, whether we are in prison or not. Because the truth – the true relationship, the true belonging – gives us the freedom that the powers of darkness cannot take away. Jesus is the freest human being who ever lived because he was the most connected to God. Pilate condemned him. Pilate wanted to make him one of the damned. But he could not. Jesus’s death, instead of being the execution of a death sentence, became the way to the full truth, leading to full freedom.*

I think that is what the early church discovered through its experience of imprisonment and persecution as it carried the life of Christ within itself: freedom in the truth, and that kind of freedom made Christ a King that no person or power could defeat. In the hands and lives of the early church, the sovereignty of truth was power, evidence of the reign of Christ that stood above and beyond every dysfunctional mortal emperor. The challenge for them, and for every generation of disciples since, is to listen to the voice of Christ. What truth is Christ speaking to us that we need to hear this day? Can we hear it? Of what truth are we stewards, caretakers and guardians, that the world needs to hear because it cannot speak the truth to itself?

One of the greatest challenges churches of all stripes seem to be facing is how to represent this tremendous Gospel of freedom, joy, and truth in fresh ways that go beyond the same old forms of the past. And that is a tough challenge—it is always hard to think creatively about outreach precisely because we are most familiar with what we know, with how we were formed and raised in the faith. Gradye Parsons, the stated clerk of our General Assembly, is getting ready to retire next year. In a sermon he preached at last month’s conference in Portland, Oregon that I attended, he cautioned us about falling prey to the popular myth that says, “Young families with good incomes and children will save the church.” And he had us laughing as he described the way we too often descend upon young families who visit on a Sunday morning, fawning over them after worship to keep them coming back so that they will fill our vacant classrooms and give us the energy we crave. He reminded us that the church has only one savior, and that savior is Jesus Christ, and the salvation Christ offers is the gift of himself and the power to become children of God when we enter into a relationship with him of truth and freedom. Only Christ is King, not new demographics, not a matching service, not money, not even a new pastor—Christ alone is King.

In the last part of his reflection on Jesus as a condemned man, standing before

Pilate, Nouwen writes this:

*I know that the more I belong to God, the more I will be condemned. But the condemnation of the world will reveal the truth. “Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness, the kingdom of Heaven is theirs” (Matthew 5:10). I have to trust these words. Precisely there where the world hates me, where I am not taken seriously by the powers that be, where I am pushed aside, laughed at and made marginal, there precisely I may discover that I am part of a worldwide community that is barred, fenced in, and locked away in isolated camps.*

*I hunger for the truth, for that communion with God that Jesus lived. But every time that hunger is satisfied, I will be condemned again and given a heavy cross to bear. It is the story of Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, James and Andrew, and most of all of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Their joy and sorrow became one because they chose to live the truth in the world. That cannot happen without our being given a cross to bear, but also not without the immense joy of being already now part of the divine life that reaches beyond any barred fence or gallows.*

*Yes, there is fear in the eyes of the man behind the bars, but also conviction, trust, hope, and a deep knowledge of freedom. His eyes and mine are eyes that see what the world cannot see: the face of a suffering God who calls us far, far beyond our fears into the land of a love that lasts.*

Can you hear that truth? On this pinnacle Sunday of the Christian year, can you hear the voice of Christ calling you to freedom, and how important that voice is to the prisoner, to the blind, and the lame, and to those who have no hope? That must be our voice. That is the voice of Christ the King, who has chosen to speak through us to a world crying out for a truth that endures and freedom from bondage and relationships of love and trust that will not fail.



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