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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, November 25, 2018
Christ the King/27th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 34/Proper 29/Year B
Primary Text: John 18:33-38a
Sermon Title: “Jesus Christ is King”

Theme

In John’s gospel, the story of Jesus and Pilate presents two different ways of exercising power: through force or with love.

Text

³³Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

Sermon

I know, that last half a verse, verse 38a wasn't printed in the bulletin. But as I prepared this sermon, Pilate's question jumped off the page at me, and so I added it.

What is truth? Perhaps you heard a bit of sarcasm in Pilate's voice. To many, to the Jews he might have seemed to have been a powerful person – one able to hand down life and death verdicts. But I sense in his voice, a hint of resignation. What is truth? Which way is the political wind blowing? Whose favor do I need to seek this week?

What is truth? In this third week after the mid-term election, that question seems pertinent. For weeks we heard each politician make allegations about their opponent. More than once I watched political advertisements and caught myself asking, is that true? We never get an answer do we? Then after the results come in, the opponents congratulate each other on the great campaign the other ran and the loser pledges his or her support to make the winner a success. Perhaps the real loser in a political election is truth.

What is truth? Ask Rudy Guiliani. "Truth isn't truth."

What is truth? It might just be a question for the ages. In the age of fake news and lying public figures it certainly is a question for our time. Right up there with "what is the meaning of life?" One might expect that in the 2000 years since Pilate voiced the question we might have come to some clear answers.

I am quite sure history's great philosophers pondered the question. And yet are any of you clear about the answer? Nowadays, philosophers say that there is no such thing as a universal truth. What Rudy Guiliani actually said was that different people have different version of the truth, all of which may be true from their perspective. And so what is true is that what may appear to be true for one is by no means true for another. In fact, many people hold multiple, contradictory truths and are not distressed by their incongruities. Look at Islam for example. The Iraqi Shiite's and the Sunnis are neighbors and countrymen, they worship the same God and read the same holy scripture and yet kill each other, each claiming to be on the side of what is right and true.

Indeed, truth today is relative and one truth can relate to another in a variety of compatible ways. Contradiction is one of them. Recently I led our confirmation class through a discussion of creationism, evolution, and the hybrid theory of Intelligent Design. Do our children need to leave their faith at home when they go to school or hang out with their friends? Most children have figured out that in order to pass the test in school they need to know the answer the teacher wants whether they believe it or not. When they come to church and confirmation class do they have to check their brains and engage their childlike faith as Jesus often exhorts?

What is truth? Pilate might feel philosophically at home in our day.

The natural tendency, in pursuing large questions, is to use the faculties God has given us. Art, critical thinking, and scientific experimentation: these are the human means by which we try to make sense of the world. If we cannot gain insight into a matter by ever more deeply probing inquiry, then it must be the case that no answer exists. That's where we find ourselves today. We simply cannot think any harder and reading the great thinkers; Aristotle, Plato, Des Cartes, Nietzsche, and Kant is not for sissies. Newton, Einstein, and Hawkings have taken us as far as we can conceptually go. Our high school science teachers can tell us what happened one millionth of a second after the *big bang*. But they cannot tell us what caused it. Maybe the answer to that has something to do with truth.

Some of us, of course, realize that it does. The truth, as Christians know, is that the unexplorable, indefinable, ultimate cause of the universe, the ultimate prime mover, ... is the author of life, the inventor of love, and the giver of every grace. We know this because we investigate with another God-given faculty. Not knowledge, art, or science, but something beyond investigation and interrogation. The gift is faith. It lies just beyond the reach of philosophy and a millionth of a second before scientific inquiry.

It eluded Pilate, who was too world-weary to know the truth if it walked up and looked him in the face. It eludes many who seek after truth in various and contradictory ways. Yet, it is within the grasp of the simplest of minds.

Faith is that incomprehensible gift that makes the humblest person content and answers the most confounding questions of great thinkers. It is illogical,

impenetrable, and not testable. Human reason has its place but when it and all else fails to explain even the simplest, most basic questions, like “what is truth?” then faith becomes the thing we cling to most fiercely.

What is truth? It is belief in Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, descended to the dead, resurrected on the third day, who sits at the right hand of God, the *ultimate cause*, the *cosmic will* who sparked the *big bang*.

There is much we still do not know about the truth, even we believers. We ask questions of each other all the time:

- What exactly happens when we die?
- What is heaven like? (Will there be chocolate cake or beer?)
- What is God's will for my life?
- When will Christ return?

We still have plenty of questions about the truth and the faith that reveals it. But, we are not driven to investigate and experiment until we discover the answers. We are content to know that all we need to know has been revealed to us in scripture, or will be revealed to us in God's good time.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Like Pilate, we have questions about the truth. But, we do not ask, as he did, with fatal resignation. We seek the answer by searching in the only manner it can be found. We open our minds and hearts to him who was crucified for us, and who now lives and reigns as King of our hearts and Ruler of all earthly kings. That is my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week, this last week of the liturgical calendar.

What is truth? Speak, King Jesus. Your very Word is our answer.

Prayer

O God, you give us minds eager to know, to learn, and to pursue the answers to life's great questions. Yet, you keep some things hidden from us. Perhaps you know that there are truths too deep for us. Give us humility and patience to desire only those answers that are within our reach. Increase our desire for your Word and our trust in it as the source of truth. And give us faith so that as we await the return of

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Christ, we live lives that honor him and exhibit to the world who we believe him to be, the one who sits upon the throne of heaven. We pray in the name of Christ, the King. Amen.