

“The Trouble With Truth”

a sermon by

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Text: “Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’ After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, ‘I find no case against him’” (John 18:38).

This is a grand day of National celebration. With parades, worship services and fireworks, we mark the moment in history when the Continental Congress finally declared our Independence from Great Britain.

Since, I’m standing in Mecklenburg County, perhaps I should tell the story in this way. Today we celebrate the great events of July 4, 1776, when the Continental Congress attempted to catch up with the Presbyterians in Mecklenburg County who, about a year earlier, had themselves declared independence from Great Britain.

We all know how the events unfolded to that magnificent event. We have seen it depicted in artwork. We have read about it in books. If my memory serves me right, this was even among the subjects of *Schoolhouse Rock*.

And so it happened. Great men of thought and of action, gathered on a hot and humid day. They were in a room with the windows closed, all wearing brightly colored heavy wool coats (not one with so much as a single wrinkle), all standing ceremoniously around a single table, and each facing in the same direction so that their faces could be seen in the great artwork that would depict this event.

In truth, the events that unfolded on the 4th of July 1776¹ may be a bit different from the stories that are told. To begin with, records indicate that the weather was actually mild and quite pleasant. Also, the minutes of the Continental Congress record the vote for independence as having taken place on July 2nd – two days earlier than what we celebrate. On the 4th, the Congress did in fact meet, but they conducted very little business. On this date, they declared the document to have been authenticated and ordered that it be published. On July 6th, the Pennsylvania Evening Post printed the full text of the Declaration. On Monday, July 8th, it was read aloud to the cheers of a great crowd. After all of these events, Timothy Matlack, assistant secretary to Congress, then wrote the full text of the document on a single sheet of parchment. On August 2nd, those who were present signed it. Other signatures were added in the days and weeks ahead.

There is trouble with the truth of our Declaration of Independence. The reality is much different from the popular account of history. The truth is less dramatic. The principles proclaimed are often less clear than what legend would have them be. Reality is muddled with the working out of detailed events.

This morning, there is before us a text from the New Testament that reveals at least three truths about truth itself.

First, this text reveals that truth is not established by the wishes and whims of religious or political leaders. This very event – the arrest and trial of Jesus – was set into motion by the Chief Priests and the Scribes. They were influential religious and political leaders within their community. And they had lost patience with the man named Jesus. They needed a convenient and legal way to dispose of him.

The crime that Jesus had committed was not easy to discern.

So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”

They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.”

Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.”

The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”

¹ From David McCullough's *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), pp. 125 – 139.

And so Jesus stood before the judge having been accused of nothing more than being a criminal who should be put to death. It is interesting that, at this point, no specific accusations have been brought against him.

This text also confronts us with the fact that truth can be right there in front of us; and, even when it is before us, we can misunderstand what it is. To this moment, Pilate has twice addressed the crowd that is gathering in his presence. That he may understand what exactly is happening, he summons Jesus' to a separate conversation (*read: away from the crowds who are calling for Jesus' death*). Here, in the context of a more personal conversation, Pilate seeks to understand the truth.

The dialogue follows these questions:

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

“ *What have you done?*”

Pilate asked him, “So you are a king, aren't you?”

Jesus' final answer provided no satisfaction for Pilate. “*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.*”

Pilate concludes this conversation with a rhetorical – but very important – question, “What is truth?”

And so Jesus stood before the judge offering no defense to the non-existent accusations of any crime.

Finally, this text reveals the very important fact that truth is not established by a mob – even if the mob represents the opinion of a vast number of the people, even if the mob has a majority vote. Together with the guards who had detained Jesus, there were some from among the leaders, and also a gathering crowd. Having spoken with Jesus, Pilate turned to the crowd and said, “*I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. You want me to release for you the King of the Jews, don't you?*”

They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!”

And so Jesus stood before the judge having been convicted of no crime, but sentenced to death.

More than from this or from other stories in the Bible, there are troubles with truth.

The possibility that someone could be accused wrongly of a crime demands the most careful attention of our judicial system. Our Founding Fathers believed fervently that it is “of more importance to community, that innocence should be protected, than it is, that guilt should be punished.”

It happened in March of 1770 that a group of British soldiers were confronted by an angry mob in Boston, Massachusetts. The crowd grew in its size and in the intensity of its anger. Tensions escalated. Eventually, shots were fired. The crowd scattered. The soldiers had killed five people. As unlikely as it may seem, John Adams, of all people, agreed to defend the Captain of the Guard and the 8 soldiers involved in this incident.

In December of that year, speaking in defense of the 8 British soldiers who stood accused of murder, John Adams had this to say

“Facts are stubborn things, and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

“The jury remained out two and one-half hours. Of the eight soldiers, six were acquitted and two found guilty of manslaughter, for which they were branded on their thumbs.”²

“Facts are stubborn things.” Indeed, so too is truth itself. The stubbornness of truth is found in Pilate’s final question: “*What is truth?*”

“*What is truth?*” This is a real and relevant question even today.

“*What is truth?*” A popular dictionary includes the following statements: The real or actual state of a matter; conformity with fact or reality; a verified or indisputable fact.³

“*What is truth?*” According to a legal dictionary, “There are three conceptions as to what constitutes “truth”: agreement of thought and reality; eventual verification; and consistency of thought with itself.”⁴

“*What is truth?*” The Gospel of John records that on that very night, prior to his arrest, Jesus himself spoke an answer to this question. Said the Lord, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.*”⁵

So, again I ask, “*What is truth?*” The truth, truth in its pure form, is nothing less than the living God.

The truth, truth in its most pure form, is nothing less than the living God. In this, there is truth. But, more than that, there is hope and there is life.

You see, in the same way that facts are stubborn, truth is stubborn. Truth is so stubborn that it cannot be established by the wishes and whims of religious or political leaders. Truth is so stubborn that it can, it can be right there in front of us; and, even when it is before us, we can

² From David McCullough’s *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 68.

³ *Webster’s College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1991, p. 1432.

⁴ *Black’s Law Dictionary* (St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing Company, 1979), p. 1358.

⁵ John 14:6 – 7, NRSV.

misunderstand what it is. Truth is so stubborn that it cannot be established by a mob – even if the mob represents the opinion of a vast number of the people, even if the mob has a majority vote.

Truth is stubborn – tenacious, really. Truth cannot be escaped, there are times in life when the actions of us or of others, cause damage to lives. They cause anguish and heartache to be suffered and endured. No matter how great our remorse, how deep our regret, the damage is done. And so there are times in life when we desire nothing more than to escape the truth that haunts us and hunts us down into the depth of despair. And that’s where it happens. The truth that cannot be escaped finds us and brings with it the most unlikely companions – hope and life.

Truth never travels alone. It is always accompanied by hope and life. In the New Testament we find these words:

“If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”⁶

We cannot change the worldly consequences of our sins – the truth is what it is. But, in this same way, neither can we change the grace and love of the Lord, our God – truth is what it is.

Pilate asked, “*What is truth?*” He wanted to know the facts that brought Jesus and the angry mob into the early hours of his morning.

Throughout his life and his earthly ministry, Jesus truthfully and correctly acknowledged our wrongdoing. He then set out to do all that was necessary to provide for our forgiveness. The truth is that Jesus was to be arrested and put to death, even though he was guilty of no crime. Even more than that, the truth is that Jesus’ body would be dead and buried in a tomb; and that Jesus would be resurrected on the third day. How possibly could Pilate have understood that to be the truth? But it was the truth nonetheless.

Pilate was confronted by the truth. It was living and in his presence. What then did he do?

So, too, you are now confronted by truth. It is living and in your presence. What now shall you do?

There are many sermons to be preached on appropriate manners in which we may respond to truth. Pilate himself chose to turn away and to honor the angry crowd. Our response should be different. An example that you may choose to follow is found in the Order of this Worship service.

This morning we began by entering into the Sanctuary. As we enter into the presence of the living God – we respond with praise. Confronted by God’s majesty, confronted by God

⁶ 1 John 1: 5 – 6, 8, 10, NRSV.

himself, acknowledge your sinfulness and also God's forgiveness. Seek Guidance in God's Word as it is read, proclaimed and taught. Prayer the prayers and concerns of your heart and life. From that which God has given to you, give to others and dedicate those gifts to God. Then receive God's blessings and go out into the world to love and serve the Lord.

As you go out into the world, you will find trouble with truth. There is a tension in truth. We are called to live in this tension.

I remember reading some time ago about Winston Churchill's State Funeral. He died in 1965 and his funeral was held in St. Paul's Cathedral. As the Pall Bearers lifted his casket and proceeded down the aisle towards the door, a single bugler began playing Taps – the melancholy, audible sound signifying the end of a day, the end of a life. As the somber, methodical pace of the casket brought it near the back of the sanctuary, Taps continued to be played. But, another bugler began to play revile, a call and announcement to gather and to begin a new day of service. Eventually, Taps was finished, but the call to revile continued a bit longer. Eventually, all that remained audible was the echo and the tension of truth.

In preparing for his funeral and asking for this musical signal, Winston Churchill demonstrated the trouble and the tension of truth. In truth, our death is so certain that we might just as well be carried to our gravesite. But, also in truth, we are alive – not only in this world, but also in Christ Jesus. As surely as God is alive now, at this moment, so too shall we be alive here – but also in his kingdom – both now and forevermore.

Yes, life is hard and suffering is real. Let us signify this truth with the melancholy tone of taps. But, more than that, God is alive. We are being called to gather together and to serve. Not even death will absent us from that duty and privilege.

Regardless of what we say about truth, regardless even of what we believe it to be, truth is what it is. In a few moments, our choir will sing as an Offertory Anthem John Ireland's "*Greater Love Hath No Man.*" Drawing upon the words and images of Scripture, Ireland wrote, "*Love is strong as death. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Who His own self did bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness.*"

Truth gives to us much more than it demands from us.

But the greatest trouble with truth is this: The truth right here in your presence waiting for you to respond.

What now shall you do?