

“The Truth Made Flesh”

A Sermon Preached by Kirk Hall
First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, North Carolina
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John 18:28-38

Today’s reading comes from the Gospel According to John with a scene that we usually hear during Holy Week just before Jesus is beaten, mocked, and crucified. Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has done more than attract attention to himself. He’s broken the religious codes of what was right and wrong. He’s healed on the Sabbath, touched the unclean, forgiven sinners and when the Jewish leaders questioned him, he couldn’t deny being the Son of God.¹ His following grew - so much that the Chief Priests became nervous about the growing number of Jews abandoning their tradition to follow this man from Nazareth. So they came to the conclusion that it would be better to have one man die for the people than to have their Jewish nation torn in two.²

With the Passover bringing thousands of the faithful to Jerusalem, this was the time to set the record straight and they had a plan. Now, if someone claimed to be King of Israel, it was no longer just religious blasphemy, it was now treason against the state, punishable under the Roman law. There was only one King, Caesar, and anyone claiming anything else had to face the civil consequences. So the Chief Priests led Jesus to Pontius Pilate (the governor of Judea and Jerusalem) so that he could do their dirty work.³ **Please read John 18:28-38.**

Several years ago, there was an intriguing film entitled, “Pi”⁴ after the Greek letter and mathematical symbol. The premise of the story is that a man, with the help of his homemade computer, discovers a mathematical code upon which all things are founded and by which all things are connected.

As the film unfolds, we learn that this secret equation can unlock all the mysteries of the world to reveal the rhyme and reason for the universe, answering all unanswered questions. It’s a scientific, universal formula that stands behind everything from the stock market to population growth to epidemics to the Bible. All can be clearly seen and understood and summed up by a single mathematical equation.

Now, of course this is a fictional film but I always thought it presented an intriguing idea. What if all things in the world could be known and understood by a simple formula? What if in the midst of chaos, we could establish order by simply applying a code like a key, unlocking all of the mysteries that remain beyond our current understanding? What would we do first with our magic code? Would we end world poverty or would we corner the stock market? Would we cure AIDS or would we maintain our youth? Would we establish world peace through equality or would we use this code to secure our own position of power? Whatever we would do, the world would make sense. We could know, beyond a shadow of doubt, who was right and who was

wrong, who was guilty and who was innocent. We could clarify the lines that separate “us” from “them.” And with those clear lines, the chaos would find order, just like that.

But when the movie ends and the lights come back on, we look around and we are made profoundly aware that there is no formula, no code that penetrates life’s mysteries. For now, we are simply left to face the humility of the unanswered questions, doing what we can together and paying attention when we succeed and asking forgiveness when we fail. In our reading today, Pontius Pilot doesn’t have that luxury, let alone a secret code.

While we don’t know a lot about Pilate from scripture, historians tell us that during his ten-year service as the governor of Jerusalem and Judea, the territory over which he had jurisdiction experienced 32 riots between the Jews and Romans. Three riots a year for ten years. The Jews hated the Romans. They hated Roman taxes, they hated the Roman disregard for their religion, they hated the way that Romans abused them.⁵ And when the Romans pushed, the Jews pushed back.

Today’s reading describes a time toward the end of Pilate’s tenure during the festival of the Passover when Jews from all over the known world flooded the city. So it is safe to assume that Pilate was under pressure to come to a clear and definite answer to this “Jesus problem.” It was no time to start another riot. Pilate needed answers and he needed them fast. If Jesus was a King in Roman territory, then Pilate could try him, judge him, and put him to death as a threat to the state. Problem solved. He needed the answers to determine who was right and who was wrong, who was innocent and who was guilty.

So he summons Jesus with all the necessary questions; Are you the King of the Jews? I am not a Jew, am I? What have you done? So are you a King? In other words, ‘Give me something to come to some clear and straightforward conclusion. Make your best argument so that I can judge who you are and who you are not. Answer my questions and let me bring order back to this Kingdom. But Jesus just responds to Pilate’s questions with more questions. He described a Kingdom ‘not from this world’ where fighting and violence were not an option and that he (Jesus) stood before him to testify to the truth. I am sure Pilate grew frustrated when the main witness, testifying to the truth, wouldn’t give a straight answer. So just as Jesus tells Pilate that “those who belong to the truth, listens to my voice,” Pilate had heard enough and Pilate asks this final question with something between cynicism and doubt, “What is Truth?” and he walks out. He doesn’t even wait for an answer. But who can blame him?

It is hard not to be a cynic when tensions and infighting persist. Conflicts continue between Israel and Palestine, Sunnis and Shiites, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, FOX News and CNN. Even in the church, there are divisions drawing lines between “us” and “them,” the “faithful” and the “ungodly.” It seems that someone is always calling for a crucifixion and no one is innocent and (of course) no one is guilty. The one thing that we all seem to have in common is the desire to grasp some order by claiming to know who is in the right and who is in the wrong. Nowhere is this more evident in the Presbyterian Church’s recent debate over the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy.

When I was serving in my previous call, we ran a Wednesday night class to offer a space where our community of faith could understand and engage in this very discussion and even wrestle with some of the issues at hand. Each week we invited different people with different perspectives involved in this debate. Most had a passionate, faithful perspective. Lines, if anything, began to blur.

On the final week of the series, we invited the Bishop of the local Episcopalian Church to share with us his experience of the debate within his own denomination. We asked him to offer some/any guidance as to how to faithfully move forward as a church. He described the pain and the frustration on both sides of the debate and how, tragically, his own denomination was (at that time) threatening to split. He said something that I thought was interesting. He said that when this debate began in the Episcopalian Church, it began as a debate between (on the one side) those who want to maintain orthodoxy and (on the other) those who want to pursue justice. He said that while these are valid and faithful issues to address, issues that have been debated for generations, the discussion should never have *started* that way. When any discussion begins with two camps, it quickly becomes a debate, even before the particulars are known. He said that rather than beginning the discussion as orthodox issue or a justice issue. It should have started as a pastoral issue. In other words, rather than starting with what “this side” wanted or how “that side” was going to destroy the church, it should have started with who we are and whose we are. Not people who have the truth but people who (by grace) have been invited to participate in the truth.

Truth is a major theme in John’s Gospel. So much that word is spoken 25 times in the fourth gospel opposed to seven times in all other three gospels combined. But truth is never described as an object, a body of material that can be possessed. “Jesus is never said to teach the truth. He does not deliver the truth to his disciples, who are never said to ‘have’ the truth.” Jesus delivers himself. “He himself is God’s truth.” According to John’s Gospel, truth is not a ‘what,’ truth is a ‘who.’ “It’s a...personal encounter and relationship, worship and commitment that is experienced in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who guides disciples into all truth.”⁶

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann said it better than I ever could. He said that, “Truth evidenced in Jesus is not an idea, not a concept, not a formulation, not a fact. It is rather a way of being in the world in suffering and hope, so radical and so raw that we can scarcely entertain it.”⁷ So if (as the Gospel According to John describes), God so loved the world that God was poured into flesh, offering Christ’s body so that we might be the body of Christ then, “belonging to the truth means...participation in a community that transcends the self.”⁸

A few years ago, many of you know, the Presbyterian Church recognized the divergence of views and theologies in the life of the church. So the General Assembly called together a task force to lead our Church in a spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in the 21st century. But the General Assembly wisely didn’t grab the denominational leaders that all thought alike, that all had a specific idea of what the Body of Christ should look like. They called a group of twenty theologians and leaders, (as they themselves write)

“not because we are wiser than others but rather because we are typical of the range and variety of backgrounds, views, and values of contemporary Presbyterians—the opportunity of discovering ways that the church can live more faithfully in the face of...deep disagreements.”⁹ A group of 20 from all theological and social perspectives; the left and the right, Liberal and Conservative, those who read the Bible literally and those who read it as inspired testimony, those passionate about justice and those who long to honor orthodoxy.

The group committed themselves to a five year process of gathering together in study and prayer, sharing and listening, asking questions of one another and themselves in the often anxious space of trusting people who held different views and convictions. And they were intentional. They took the time to worship together, to pray together, to share their own personal lives with one another, to study the Bible together not to defend or affirm *their* gospel, but to trust in the transformative power of Christ.

In 2006, they issued a report entitled “Peace, Unity and Purity,” but frankly, I think that the most powerful aspect of this task force was what happened to the group itself. As they shared themselves with one another, they developed a trust and a mutual respect for one another, a love for one another (as different as they were). I am not sure how many of their convictions were changed but they affirmed that through that process of practicing truth they experienced the transformation that comes when we humbly encounter the “other.” They were empowered to look beyond their own comfort zones, beyond their personal understandings of “right and wrong,” beyond their own secret code to the mysteries of the world in order to experience the Truth that transcends this world. “Belonging to the truth means a...participation in a community that transcends the self.”¹⁰

Scripture describes a God who (someone once said) “does not come to us beyond the flesh but in the flesh, through the hands of a teacher who will not be intellectualized, but who goes on trusting the embodied sacraments of bread and wine and water. ‘Do this’ he said – not believe in this but do this – ‘in remembrance of me’ – “bless, break, share, take, eat, wash, commit, support, forgive” all ways of being together that can teach us everything we need to know.¹¹ All the things that we need to be shaped, guided, assured and (most importantly) freed from the worship of clear absolutes, freed from loving “right” or “wrong,” freed from expecting reward for our innocence and condemnation for our guilt – freed so that we can simply encounter God by encountering one another.

And today, as we gather around the font to celebrate the grace that has marked us as participants in that truth, we have made a commitment to young Lyla not to instill in her *what* to believe but, rather to show her and to learn from her *how* to live as followers in a kingdom “not from this world.” And when we get it right, as a community we pay attention. And when we get it wrong, we hit our knees and ask for forgiveness. And even in that very act, we proclaim the Good News that goes beyond the questions, beyond simple answers, beyond easy formulas, beyond ourselves.

What is truth?

Let us pray.

¹ John 5:30 (NRSV).

² John 11:50.

³ While the Gospel of John marks this episode during the festival of the Passover, entering the house of a gentile (where the law was not kept) would make a Jewish person religiously “unclean.” While the Jewish leaders threatened to stone Jesus (Levitical punishment for breaking the respective laws) Roman authorities did not let Jewish authorities carry out these death penalties in most cases.

⁴ *Pi: Faith in Chaos*, dir. Darren Aronofsky, writ. Darren Aronofsky, perf. Sean Gullette, Mark Margolis, Lionsgate, DVD, 1998.

⁵ The most reliable information we have of Pilate is from Philo, a Jewish theologian and Josephus, a Roman historian. Markquart, Edward F. "Christ the King, Lord of the Land and the Sea", *THE LIFE OF CHRIST: A Study in the Four Gospels*. Seattle, Washington, 2006. See also, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, ©1985. p. 855-6.

⁶ Boring, M.E. and Fred Craddock. *The People's New Testament Commentary*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) 2004. p. 350. I am indebted to Craddock and Boring for this theological insight and movement in the sermon.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, as quoted in Katie Huey's "A Wise Reign" Nov 13, 2009. See www.i.ucc.org

⁸ Bartlett, David, Ed. et al. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. (Louisville: WJKP) 2009. Pg. 336.

⁹ "A Season of Discernment: The Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace Unity and Purity of the Church." (General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 2006.

¹⁰ Bartlett, David, Ed. et al. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. (Louisville: WJKP) 2009. Pg. 336.

¹¹ Taylor, Barbara-Brown. *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. (New York: HarperOne) © 2009, p. 44-7.