

Mar. 30, 2014 - Jesus and Pilate
John 18:28-40

“Truth”

The title of this message is “Truth.” What comes to your mind when you this word? Facts maybe? Remember Jack Webb? What was that cop series he had in the 50s and 60s? *Dragnet*. Jack Webb’s standard line when interviewing a witness was, “Just the facts, ma’am.” I suppose most of us associate truth with facts, though we are savvy enough to know that truth runs deeper than mere facts. Or maybe when we hear the word “truth” what pops into our heads are propositions. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We Americans hold these prepositions to be true.

When American Christians speak of “truth” we often mean it in the propositional sense. That’s not how Jesus used the word. So, let’s get to the story of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Actually, there are two trials in this story. There’s obvious one of Jesus standing before Pilate. Jesus stands before Pilate because only the Romans can carry out a death sentence. Pilate as governor of Judea has it all. There was no division of powers in the Roman world, so Pilate controls the military and the finances, and he *is* the judiciary. Anyone who stands trial before Pilate has good reason to be afraid.

But who in this story is fearful? It’s not Jesus. He knows what’s going to happen. It’s Pilate who is full of fear, because Pilate is also on trial here. Inside Pilate’s headquarters, Jesus stand s trial before Pilate. Outside Pilate’s headquarters, Pilate stands trial before the Judeans. And he is afraid to do what he knows is right. So there is this back and forth as Pilate questions Jesus inside and in turn stands before the Judeans outside. Inside Pilate acts as if he is in full control. Which in a way, he is. He is the judiciary.

And yet he isn’t really in control. For one thing, he’s confused. If Jesus is to die a Roman death it will be as a revolutionary. *That* the Romans cannot abide. So he knows which question to ask: “Are you a king?” Jesus answers, “If you say so. 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.” This utterly confuses Pilate. He asks, “So you are a king?”

Pilate and Jesus are using the same word but talking about two different things. For Pilate a king is one who exercises power. For Jesus, a king is a Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. For Pilate power is about control, about power even to put a man to death. For Jesus power is about the power to lay down his life and take it up again. So Jesus’s kingship operates *in* this world but is not *of* this world. Our world bends toward power; God’s universe, as Theodore Parker famously said, bends toward justice.

Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” Here’s how the Gospel of John uses the word Truth: First, the truth is Jesus. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Truth for us Christians is not a

proposition; truth is a person. To know the truth is not to know the right thing but to know the Son of God. So the goal of our Christian message is not to convince someone that what we believe is true. Our goal is to invite them into a relationship with the one who is the truth.

Second, Jesus has come to reveal the truth about God, about who God is, and what are God's purposes. According to the Gospel of John, God is not a divine judge out to punish sin but a God who will stop at nothing to draw all people into God's love, God's healing, God's full life. Jesus doesn't tell us this truth; he shows us by embodying God's love in his very self.

One more thing about the truth. Pilate, who had it all, who seemingly had all power, is powerless in this trial. Pilate is on trial before the Judeans, and he is found to be fearful of them fearful, desperate even to hold onto his position. He makes his justifications; he washes his hands; his fear renders him powerless.

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent and wants to release him. But truth does not prevail in Pilate's world. I can imagine him saying to himself, "I can have an innocent man crucified, because that'll keep the peace and make things easier." That's the truth about Pilate.

The truth about each one of us can be uncomfortable, too. But confronting that truth, knowing the truth of the man Jesus, knowing the truth about God can set us free.