

“What is Truth?”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
Christ the King Sunday
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The scene from John’s gospel where Jesus stands before Pilate, the Roman governor in Jerusalem, who is in the unenviable position of determining what to do with this man whom he sees as having done nothing wrong, yet the Jewish leaders of the temple insist be prosecuted to the fullest extent of Roman law – is portrayed by Fredrick Buechner at the beginning of his beautiful book, “Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale” (1976) in an imaginative and powerful way. He imagines Pontius Pilate as a modern, aging, mid-level government bureaucrat who is trying to break a three pack a day cigarette habit, whose wife is severely depressed, and who has given up any dreams he might have had when he was younger of a different and more notable life. He is stuck out in this god-forsaken colonial outpost among these confounding and maddening Jews, who have been ruled by one power or another throughout their history but for some reason unknown to Pilate they have this ridiculous conviction that history, and God, is on their side.

And so as Buechner imagines him, Pontius Pilate is driven to work that day in his government limousine, feeling good that he has made it to nine o’clock without a cigarette, and after hanging up from a disturbing call from his wife he turns around in his swivel chair and there standing before him between two guards is a pathetic looking Jewish peasant with a black eye and a split lip, whom the Jewish officials want Pilate to sentence to death for claiming to be the Jewish king. It was almost laughable. “So you are the king of the Jews?” Pilate only half asks. “It’s not this world that I’m king of,” the man says. And then he says, “I’ve come to bear witness to the truth.” At this point, Buechner writes, “Without thinking, Pilate takes a cigarette from the onyx box on his desk, lights it and takes a drag so deep that he thought he would faint. And then, squinting through the smoke he said to the man, “What is truth?” By way of an answer the man with the split lip “doesn’t say a blessed thing.”

And then Buechner goes on to talk about “truth” as Pilate may have conceived of it from the perspective of his position. It’s the way we often use the word “truth.” Truth is simply what is – what happens to people. It is devastating fires in California; it’s cancer and hunger and shooting on the street; and it is power that can enforce its will on others. Pilate was perhaps amused by the man standing before him with the black eye and the split lip who was said to claim he was a king, because Pilate knew the truth – he knew the score – he knew who was in charge, and it wasn’t Jewish peasants.

But Tom Troegger, another minister and author, suggests that a less cynical view of Pilate might see this question - “What is truth?” – in another light. Maybe all the political maneuvering, the scheming and the corruption inherent in the system whose ladder he had hoped to climb higher, that the weight of all that had finally gotten to Pilate. Maybe, suggests Troegger, he hoped for a different kind of truth, a truth deeper than the truth of the obvious. “Everyone who

belongs to the truth listens to my voice” is what Jesus said, and perhaps when he said it, it felt to Pilate that someone opened a window in a room where people were suffocating for lack of air, and for an instant he felt the freshness, the light on his heart, and he asked with a more expectant voice, “What is truth?”

I think we can appreciate both perspectives – both the truth of things as they are, the “naked truth,” we sometimes say, the obvious truth, the kind of truth that Pilate, and all of us, are accustomed to dealing in – and the deeper truth that we long for, that we pray would emerge from beneath or from behind the obvious truth of what simply is.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” Jesus says earlier in John’s gospel (8:32). These are words that stand over the gate of many a university. As children of the Enlightenment we largely understand this as referring to intellectual truth – the pursuit and knowledge of theories and facts that empower us to master our lives, our environment, our world. So many advances have been made – scientific, technological – by the pursuit of this kind of world-as-it-is truth. But for all of our advances we cannot claim to have a better grasp of the truth that is deeper than the obvious. It hasn’t resulted in the end of war, only in more efficient ways to kill one another. Though great gains have been made, it has not provided an end to human suffering. It has provided greater production and consumption for those who have the means, often at the expense of those who don’t. That is because in the end the truth of which Jesus spoke, the kind that truly sets you free, is not something you can grasp at all, but can only grasp you. And yet, in the name of God, “truth” is often wielded like a weapon, used to beat down, to exclude, to dominate. It is used to separate people from one another, to stand as judge over others.

Pilate’s question to Jesus, the way John just lets it sort of hang there at the end, does seem to imply some sense of struggle or reach on Pilate’s part. The scene lends itself to speculation because it is so clear who is really on trial here – and it isn’t Jesus. He is the one with no power and no weapons, the one who is about to face execution – but he is the one who is free. He came, he said, “to bear witness to the truth.” This is why he was born, why he came into the world. Many, including his disciples, wanted him to turn that witness toward building a visible kingdom, essentially to trade places with Pilate, to assume power and stand in judgment over people much as Pilate did. But Jesus refused that role at the beginning of his ministry when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and he refused it here near the end when Pilate gave him an opportunity to plead his own case.

If we are to be “truly” free, it won’t be because we place Christ on a throne, or still less by giving ultimate power to a “Christian” government. The Church ruled Europe for a thousand years, and it wasn’t a pretty sight.

The truth of which Christ spoke was the truth that Christ is. What is truth? Truth is relationship with him, and through him to all others. We should think of this truth less as objective facts that we accept or reject, and more as we would think of “being true” to our spouse or to a friend. It is as clear and direct as that. We know what that means. To be true is to be faithful and loyal, to

bind yourself to another in trust and love. We know this kind of trust and love, loyalty and fidelity, as freedom. It is freedom to be loved by another and to love in return, to care and be cared for, to serve and be served by another. True freedom is not being liberated from commitment, but in being defined by it. The biblical word is “covenant” – the relationship between God and God’s people. This is the way in which Christ reigns over, that reigns within and among, those who seek to be true to him through faith.

The other way to say this is that God rules in our lives, and in the life of the world, through love. God is love – which we know not by having accepted some doctrine or ascribed to a set of propositions and called them “true” – but by God’s actually loving us, and us loving God in return. Pilate’s question just hangs there, at the end, just as it hangs there when the pettiness and the meanness of life weighs us down, when the “naked truth” reveals so much that it makes us wonder if that is the only truth there is – when our confidence in the truth we have created out of our own lives is showing cracks and we wonder how much longer we can hold it all together. Could it be – could it possibly be – in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, or in spite of all we’ve been told or heard about a judging God, or a vengeful God, or an indifferent God – that the creative and saving power that lay at the center of all there is or ever will be, is love? Is this what Pilate was really asking after, in his question? Is it what we wonder about, seek or otherwise yearn for? Could it be that love, personified in Christ, the one who loved with God’s own love to the end, so it wasn’t the end but only the beginning – always a beginning – is really there, behind, beneath, above, below – all that apparently is anything but love?

This is what we proclaim, what we confess, what we sing. Maybe it doesn’t always grasp us. Sometimes we respond to the meanness and the pettiness with skepticism and scorn – “What is truth?” But there are those other times, times when we can allow ourselves to acknowledge that we are not as free as Christ would have us free, times when the holiest yearnings of our hearts have found their way to the surface and we have asked with intense hunger and hope, “What is truth?” – what is really the truth here? – what calls out my loyalty, my trust and devotion – not just any truth, but the truth that sets you free? Maybe today some form of that question is alive in you, or maybe you wish it were. God receives us, receives our questioning hearts in love, always in love. Turn to the risen Christ, and in faith and prayer, ask again. In openness and trust keep asking and do not stop, do not let go until the Lord blesses you with truth.

Amen.