

What Is Truth?
A Sermon on John 18:33-38
Reign of Christ Sunday
November 25, 2018

Introduction

This is Christ the King Sunday. In gender inclusive language, it is known as Reign of Christ Sunday.

Each year the lectionary focuses on a different aspect of Christ as King. In Year A, we have the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus is judge, separating the sheep from the goats. In Year C, the text is Luke 23:33-43. Jesus is hanging on the cross with two outlaws. Jesus is a savior, who promises the repentant outlaw, “Today you will be with me in Paradise. Today’s text focuses on Jesus as the revelation of Truth.

Biblical and secular understandings of Truth have evolved over the centuries. We almost seem to have given up on finding truth today. Truth is relative. It seems to depend upon what identity group you belong to. Pilate’s question is still our question: What is Truth?

First Move: Pilate’s Questioning about Truth

John has a different chronology from the other three gospels. The disturbance in the temple precipitates Jesus’ arrest in the Synoptic Gospels, but the Temple scene takes place at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry in the Gospel of John—it is in John 2. The cause for Jesus’ arrest in the Gospel of John is the raising of Lazarus in John 11. The chief priests and Pharisees concluded that if they let Jesus continue to perform signs, “every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” Everyone will recognize that Jesus embodies truth. The high priest Caiaphas said, “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

Jesus has been arrested in the Garden and taken to the high priest for questioning. Then the Judean leaders take Jesus to the praetorium, Pilate’s headquarters. Pilate told them to judge Jesus by their own law. The leaders of Judea said that it was not lawful for them to put any man to death. They brought Jesus to Pilate so that he would order a death sentence for political insurrection.

Pilate gets right to the point. The first question that he asks Jesus is, “Are you the king of the Judeans?” Pilate is only concerned about treason. Rome would not allow a rival king to claim authority over the people. Historical Jesus scholars believe that it is likely that the inscription, King of the Judeans, was hung over Jesus on the cross. It is likely that Jesus was executed because he was viewed as a political threat. So when Christians debate whether Jesus was political, you can answer that the Romans thought he was.

King of the Judeans is a Roman expression. The Jewish people called their king the king of Israel. The Romans had divided the kingdom of Israel into three parts: Galilee and Perea, which had their own kings, and Judea, which was ruled by Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman prefect or governor.

Jesus never gives Pilate a straight answer. Jesus answers, “My kingdom [or better, my kingship] is not from this world.” Jesus is talking about the source of his authority rather than the extent of his territory. Jesus’ authority as king comes directly from God. Jesus told Nicodemus that a person needs to be born of the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. Being born of the Spirit also means being born again or born from above.

Pilate is confused whether Jesus is claiming to be a king or just a religious leader. If he is only a religious leader, Pilate will turn him back over to the chief priests to be tried for blasphemy. Pilate asks, “So are you a king?”

Jesus is evasive. “You say that I am a king.” Jesus doesn’t claim the title of king. Jesus says, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” Jesus sees his mission as being a witness to the truth. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the Word made flesh, the revelation of God’s truth. Everyone who believes that Jesus has been sent from God will enter the kingdom.

Pilate responds, “What is truth?” Pilate doesn’t recognize Jesus as a revelation of God’s truth. The questioning is over. Pilate hands Jesus over to the Jewish religious leaders and says, “I find no case against him.”

Second Move: Evolving Understandings of Truth

The Greek word for truth is ἀλήθεια. It holds together two meanings. When it appears in the Greek Old Testament, it translates the Hebrew word, *amin*, which has an underlying meaning of something that is firm and solid. In Greek secular usage, ἀλήθεια means something that is seen or expressed. In the Bible, truth is when an invisible God is made visible. God’s character is eternally consistent with God’s plan. God is the rock upon which we can depend. So in the Gospel of John, truth means

a revelation of God's character or God's plan. Jesus is truth because Jesus reflected what God is like.

In Christian theology, Augustine combined this understanding of truth with Greek philosophy. Augustine compared truth to Plato's forms as something that was reliable and durable. Plato believed that ideal forms were the essence of reality. Matter is an attempt to imitate the forms. There is an ideal form of a table, and every table that a carpenter creates is an attempt to imitate the ideal form. The ideals are what is really real not the matter that replicates the forms. Matter is defective to the extent that it fails to perfectly reflect the ideal.

If we use this conception of truth, it is easy for religious truth to calcify into dogma. Truth becomes immutable and unchanging. Living truth becomes dead dogma.

Thomas Aquinas turned toward a modern understanding of truth by relying upon Aristotle instead of Plato. Aristotle went beyond philosophy and inquired into science, poetics and rhetoric. Aristotle's science dealt with actual substances instead of ideals. He tried to develop a synthesis of all wisdom. Aquinas tried to reconcile Christian theology with Aristotle's understanding of science. Aquinas believed that religion and science were complementary. God is revealed through nature as well as through the written word, and we learn about God by learning about nature.

Truth in the Enlightenment tilted even more toward science. Truth came to mean conformity to reality, something that has been tested by scientific observation.

We have different expectations about the certainty of truth, depending on the subject matter. Mathematical proof deals with abstract numbers, similar to Plato's forms; it admits of only one objective answer. We can't expect that level of proof in other fields. Scientific observation gives us a statistical analysis of what happens when we limit the input to one variable. We expect similar results in the future to results produced in the past, we make a hypothesis about what causes this to happen. The hypothesis is our best working understanding of causation, but it is subject to change as new variables are introduced and a better hypothesis fits the facts.

When it comes to matters of ethics and how we should live together in families and in communities, truth is more variable. We act more on beliefs and customs than we do on truth.

Truth has a built-in advantage over belief. It doesn't go away just because you stop believing in it. Truth persists. We are designed by evolution to conform our beliefs to reality. If we didn't, our species or our tribe would die and those who could adapt to reality would survive.

One of our best guides for finding truth, especially on moral and political principles, is John Stuart Mills' *On Liberty*. Mill describes three ways that free speech and free debate help us find the truth. First, "the [other person's] opinion might possibly be true." Their belief may be closer to the truth than ours is. Second, we can hold our opinion more securely if it has been challenged ("He who only knows his side of the case, knows little of that"). Third, opposing views may each contain a portion of the truth, which needs to be combined ("Conflicting doctrines share the truth between them.")

We arrive at truth through a dialectic process, a reconciling of opposites. The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has written an introduction to a new edition of *On Liberty*. Haidt believes that Mill can help us in these times of deep political polarization. Mill's timeless truth is that we need each other. We cannot find truth on our own. We all suffer from confirmation bias, the tendency to search only for evidence that will confirm our existing beliefs and prejudices. The only reliable cure for the confirmation bias is interacting with other people who have a different confirmation bias, and who do you the favor of criticizing your ideas. We find truth by engaging each other.

I enjoy talking to people and reading authors who are more conservative than me if they are open-minded. Jonathan Haidt and Steven Pinker, a cognitive psychologist, like to challenge opinions on the left and the right. They point out blind spots and encourage us to recognize the wisdom in opposing viewpoints.

We need people who look at the world differently from us. Talking to people we disagree with is a spiritual discipline. It doesn't come natural to us. We have to work at it.

The problem is, we shut ourselves off from people who think differently. We get offended if someone disagrees with us--we take it personally. We have to keep our identity separate from our ideas. Otherwise we are likely to experience any criticism of our ideas as an attack on self rather than as an opportunity to think about our ideas more deeply. We respond by making arguments *ad hominem*, which are attacks against the person. These are the most common arguments we see in politics and on social media. *Argumentum ad hominem* is a logical fallacy; it avoids discussing the topic at hand and instead attacks the character or motives of the person making the argument. Then we have started a war. We are attacking each other instead of discussing beliefs and ideas and trying to find common ground.

The dialectic process that John Stuart Mill describes is similar to the consensus model of governance. We revised our constitution and by-laws five years ago to move to a consensus model. We called it The Design for Edmond Trinity Christian Church,

just as the organizing document for our denomination is called The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. Our Design sets forth our method for discussion. We each have a responsibility to each other to share our convictions and beliefs with each other. The goal is for all hearts to be clear; each member should feel as if his or her perspective has been heard and respected. Once all perspectives have been heard, the group makes a decision. Each member commits that, if he or she has been heard, he or she will cooperate with the direction of the group rather than insisting on his or her personal preference.

Third Move: Discerning the Truth

We are not a debate club—we are a church. Truth for Christians is something more than just the conformity of appearance to reality or everyone agreeing on the best course of action. Truth is neither good nor bad in and of itself; it merely reflects reality. Alfred North Whitehead, the founder of process philosophy and process theology, says that Truth and Beauty are linked together. In the absence of Beauty, Truth sinks to triviality.

Christ is our model for Beauty as a person and the kingdom of God is our model for Beauty as a community.

The transformation process will help us find Truth and Beauty. We will focus on questions like, how do we be church together? How do we be faithful disciples of Christ? How do we become a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world?

It will be a challenge for us to engage in open and honest discussion about the purpose and direction of the church without getting offended and personally attacking each other

The goal is to be sustainable. We have a good core of members. We need to add to it to be sustainable. The mainline church has been declining for 40 years. Congregations have been shrinking and closing. The congregations that survive will be the ones that adapt.

We all need to reflect on basic questions about Truth and Beauty. What good news do we have to share? How can we testify to the difference that Christ makes in our lives? How can we bring the good news to our community? How can we build our church community?

We have brought in Hope Partnership because it has experience in taking other churches through this process. They can look at our membership, our ministry, our finances, our facilities and offer the perspective of an informed outsider.

We should be thankful for Hope Partnership's input and open to it. Some churches ignore their suggestions because the pastor or the board chair thinks they

have better ideas. We have proven that we need help in reaching out to the community and bringing in new members, especially members who are younger than 50.

We will receive Leadership Training on Friday, December 7, and Saturday, December 8. The entire congregation will participate in the Friday evening session. We will share a meal together and learn about changing spiritual practices in North America and the impact they have on Edmond Trinity. Truth is not static. It reflects a dynamic reality. Christ calls us to adapt to the needs of an ever-evolving human community.

The Saturday session will be for a smaller group of four to six members who will facilitate House Meetings. They will receive the assessment report that Rick Morse wrote after his visit here in October. They will be trained in facilitating small group discussions, how to read the report, and how to engage people in the curriculum developed by Hope Partnership. These leaders will plan their strategy for engaging as much of the congregation as possible in House Meetings. We will probably divide the congregation into two or three groups for the House Meetings.

Each group will have at least four House Meetings. Hopefully they will have lively discussions about what it means to be a vital congregation, what the assessment says about the current condition of our congregation, the opportunities in our community, what it means to be missional, and what direction our congregation should pursue if we are going to relate to our community.

At the end of the House Meetings, the facilitators of the House Groups will make a recommendation to the congregation regarding the future direction of the church. They will write a story for the future of our congregation.

Once the recommendation is made, the Hope Facilitator will work with the ministry team to meet for four more sessions to utilize a Mission Revisioning resource provided by Hope. By the end of the ministry team's work, we will have a capacity report that outlines next steps and how we can build capacity to grow into our story.

This will be a team effort. Each of us should welcome the new and different perspectives we will receive during this process. Each of us should share our thoughts and our experiences with the group, but none of us should be offended if the group, after hearing and thoughtfully considering us out, chooses to move in another direction.

That is our model for arriving at the future direction for our congregation. We take a hard look at our present situation. Confront the truth about where we are. We talked at the Appreciative Inquiry session in October about what we are doing well,

what we appreciate about our church. We will turn to what we need to what we are not doing so well, what we need to improve on.

Conclusion

Our search for Truth and Beauty will require us to reflect on what Christ means to us. If we make Christ the center, Christ will lead us to younger generations that we aren't reaching now, we will open our eyes to new ways to draw people who have been turned off by church or who believe that church is not important enough to make room on their schedule for it.

We may have to find new ways of reflecting Christ and drawing people to the Beauty of Christ.

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