

QUESTIONS PILATE ASKED  
John 18:33-38

4. "What Is Truth?"  
John 8:31-47

**"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,"** Jesus said to Pilate. **"What is truth?"** Pilate asked in response.

That is a very profound question, though Pilate doesn't wait around for an answer. For the sake of emphasis in the graphic on the bulletin cover, I included only the first half of the 38<sup>th</sup> verse. The second half reads: **"After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him." Pilate then continues, "But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit."**

It's as if Pilate wanted no involvement in this matter. He wasn't the least bit interested in an answer. Or maybe, just maybe, he's an example of what the Epistle of James means when it says: **"Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like."**<sup>1</sup> Little did Pilate realize that he was walking away from truth. Little did Pilate realize that he really didn't know himself.

In point of fact, if humanity isn't turning its back on truth it is probably attacking it: **"Now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God,"** we heard in today's reading.<sup>2</sup>

What is truth? It sounds like an abstract question posed to students in Philosophy 101, but it is one that has practical implications for life and, in Jesus' case, it is a matter of life or death.

Wikipedia is an on-line encyclopedia that is increasingly proscribed by colleges and universities as an acceptable tool for student research. Why? Because Wikipedia has an open-editing system, which allows anyone to write or edit entries anonymously so that you're never quite sure if what you are reading is true or not.<sup>3</sup>

What is truth? If you've ever been one of several witnesses to a traffic accident and were questioned by police, you know that it is an illusive question with as many different answers as there are witnesses. It's almost the same if you've even sat on a jury. The truth of the matter isn't always abundantly clear. If it was, there wouldn't be such a thing as a hung jury.

Every "crisis de jour" in our nation's capital begs the question, "what is truth?" Can it be known unless testimony is taken under oath? Does testimony under oath guarantee that the truth be known?

What is the truth about our enemies such as Iran and North Korea? What is the truth about ourselves?

What is the truth is the paramount question asked by a marriage counselor when meeting with a conflicted couple.

What is truth is a question that often tries to pit science against religion. For example, which is the true version of the origin of the species – the Bible or Darwin? I suspect the answer to that perennial question is “neither!”

The search for truth during the last two millennia has divided the Christian church into who knows how many denominations and traditions. Did Jesus institute seven sacraments as Christians believed until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, or only two as the Reformers insisted? Which is it? What is truth? What is the true church? The Roman Catholic Church as the Pope would assert, or the Evangelical Presbyterian Church as some critics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) would claim, or if they wouldn't the burden of claiming to be the *one true* church, at least they would claim to be more faithful.

Every church tradition believes that it has *the* truth locked up in their theological systems of doctrines and dogmas. We would be more humble and the world would be a lot healthier if more of us were more familiar with an obscure hymn text from the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Alfred Tennyson:

Our little systems have their day  
They have their day and cease to be;  
They are but broken lights of Thee,  
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,  
But more of reverence in us dwell;  
That mind and soul, according well,  
May make one music as before.<sup>4</sup>

I have to believe that more reverence and less boasting about knowing *the* truth would serve the world better. Someone has said, “When we claim to have arrived at the Truth, capital T, we cheat ourselves. Finality of understanding, closure of interpretation, shuts one off from future insights, illuminations, inspirations, etc. When it comes to Truth with a capital T, we spend our lives in waiting rooms on our knees. There are no ‘immaculate perceptions.’ We all walk into the dark.”

Presbyterians like to talk about the “Great Ends (purposes) of the Church,” one of which is “the preservation of the truth.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately for me, the image I have of preserving the truth comes from my childhood. I remember a corner in our basement known as the fruit cellar with its rows of jellies, jams, fruits and vegetables and other things my mother had preserved. That may not be your image about preserving truth, but that's what we often try to do with it. We want to package it in some way that is easily identified for all time. But to think we can freeze, pickle, smoke, sterilize, radiate, can, box or otherwise hermetically seal the truth is to hold an idea about truth that is the opposite of what Jesus meant.

What is truth? If Pilate and the rest of us would stay around long enough, we might learn that truth is much more dynamic than any jar of pickles on the shelf.

First of all, truth is much more relational than propositional. By that I mean, *what is truth* is the wrong question. Rather, we should ask, *Who is truth?* **“I am truth,”** said Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

One of our confessions of faith says that “In Jesus of Nazareth, true humanity was realized once for all.”<sup>7</sup> *True humanity* can be taken in two ways. Jesus lived a fully human life as we do with all our joys and sorrows. The scripture tells us **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”**<sup>8</sup> We can also say, therefore, that *true humanity* that Jesus lived life as God meant human life to be lived, that is, in complete trust and obedience to God and in love toward all people.

To the skeptic who might complain, “what right do we have to say we meet *the* truth in Jesus rather than “my guy,” for example, or maybe even myself?” we could answer, “put whomever next to Jesus and see for yourself.” Dwight L. Moody once said, “The best way to show that a stick is crooked is not to argue about it or to spend time denouncing it, but to lay a straight stick alongside it.”

Jesus is the straight stick. **“The word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”**<sup>9</sup> We Christians believe that Jesus is the demonstration of the presence of God in the world. That is not an intellectual doctrine but an observation and one that asks the question, can anyone anywhere point to a straighter stick, a better example of life in all of its fullness? Is there someone out there other than Jesus whom you would prefer to emulate? If so, who and why?

Secondly, in the Bible, truth is not so much contrasted with falsehood as it is with fickleness. Synonyms for truth would be: steadiness, stability, soundness, faithfulness, constancy, loyalty. When we talk about the God of truth, we mean the God who is true: true to the very nature of God and true to us. The God who is true is the God whose love is steadfast and endures forever. The God who is true is the God who can be depended on.

Conversely, one who is without the truth is one who is not dependable or who is unfaithful. Do you ever see the local TV news in the morning with a camera mounted somewhere in Camden looking across the Delaware River at the skyline of Philadelphia that you can barely see because of morning fog and gray skies. Occasionally you hear good news with that picture – “By noon time that fog will burn off and we’ll be treated to a beautiful sunny day.” At least we can hope!

The prophet Hosea uses that same image in a negative way to describe the lack of faithfulness and truth among God’s people. **“Your declarations of love last no longer than morning mist and predawn dew.”**<sup>10</sup> If you know someone who doesn’t ring true to you, it’s probably because they are undependable. As God’s people, we don’t always ring true. That doesn’t mean we know nothing about God or that we are ignorant of doctrinal truths. It does mean that we aren’t always dependable. That becomes apparent on Good Friday when we’re off hiding in the bushes, denying that we ever knew Jesus.

Ultimately, truth is liberating; truth sets us free. I heard an interview on public radio this past week with a theologian and a psychologist who took part in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was created after the fall of apartheid. Wise leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu knew that if there was any way forward for their nation it would only be as forgiveness was extended, not forgiveness that was blind to the truth, but forgiveness that was offered in the piercing light of truth. The premise was that any individual, whatever he or she had done, was eligible for amnesty if they would fully disclose and confess their crimes. Victims were invited to tell their stories and witness the confessions.

It was not truth for truth's sake, but truth for the sake of reconciliation. The theologian, Charles Villa-Vicencio, put it this way:

If we want to talk about justice or we want to talk about truth outside of the desire to be reconciled, outside of the desire to build a relationship, outside of the desire to move on, if it's outside of that, then truth and justice can be a very destructive and a very vindictive thing. I think one of the fundamental philosophical roots of the Truth and Reconciliation is an African notion of *ubuntu*, which, loosely translated, means 'humanity.' It means to live together. It is a concept that says, 'I am through you and you are through me.' It's only as we engage in truthful dialogue and a quest for building a relationship that we can grow as individual people. So to the extent that I am estranged from you, I am less than human. It's a relationship that is required.<sup>11</sup>

Too often we use truth as a club to beat others over the head. "Boy, have I got the goods on you!" In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however, truth was brought into the light only for the purpose of reconciliation. Paul Tillich, one of the great theological minds of the last century who for years taught at Union Seminary in New York, said something similar in one of his sermons a few short years after the end of World War II: "Distrust every claim for truth where you do not see truth united with love; and be certain that you are of the truth and that the truth has taken hold of you only when love has taken hold of you and has started to make you free from yourselves."<sup>12</sup>

Jesus Christ is God's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In him we see truth united with love as we see it nowhere else. In the light of truth, we are revealed for who we are, but the good news is, we don't have to run and hide. We are loved, accepted and forgiven. It's the only way forward. In the words of Anne Lamott, "I do not understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us."

## Endnotes

1. James 1:22-24 (*The Message*)
2. John 8:40
3. csmonitor.com 3/9/07
4. The Hymnbook, 1955, #228
5. “The great ends of the church are: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind,; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; **the preservation of the truth**; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” Book of Order, Form of Government G-1.0200
6. John 14:6
7. *Confession of 1967*, Book of Confessions, 9.08
8. Hebrews 4:15
9. John 1:14
10. Hosea 6:4, *The Message*
11. *Speaking of Faith*, hosted by Krista Tippett on NPR, March 22, 2007
12. *What Is Truth?*, The New Being, (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1955) p. 74