



GOD'S HONEST TRUTH
SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 8: 18-9:1; JOHN 3: 13-17
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 18, 2016
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“What is truth?”

Pontius Pilate asks Jesus this question. Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.

“What is truth?”

Pilate says with truth staring him right in the face.

Pilate is an opportunist. A political animal. A man who does not impress with his moral courage.

At face value, it sounds like Pilate wants just the facts about Jesus of Nazareth—“Are you who they say you are, the King of the Jews?” “Do you think you are King of the Jews?”

Questions he would only ask if he couldn't see who was right in front of him.

Or just maybe his question is a desperate plea. Perhaps the words of a man jaded by the way power shows you that you really have no friends, you really cannot trust anyone's word.

Pilate doesn't even trust himself.

His question exposes his interior torture. “What is truth?” he has wondered for so long now. “How will I ever know truth again when I've seen the things I have seen, when I have done the things I have done?”

“And here this man is before me— innocent of any crime I can see—and his own people are betraying him, his own people want him dead.” “And I will let them have their cooked up truth. I will let him die. I will let the lies have their way.”

What is truth in such brokenness, in such brutality, in such ambivalence?

Pilate's question may be more despair than devil may care.

What is truth?

The Gospel of John is all about truth—and Jesus is it!

This gospel is the most removed of the four gospels from the generation of those who knew Jesus. And this gospel is the most unambiguous of all four gospels about who Jesus was. This gospel, more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is the one to make unequivocal claims about Jesus' divinity—and Jesus' self knowledge about his divinity.

This clarity in John is a response in part to what was happening in the gospel writer's time—more than about what was happening in Jesus' time. There was a movement afoot that espoused the notion that Jesus' suffering was an illusion.

John wants readers to see the reality of Jesus' suffering, a suffering God, the suffering God is the one who has the power to truly heal us, to redeem our suffering.

Our passage today is one of the most well known passages in scripture and it is one of the most weaponized passages in scripture. John 3:16: the formula for many for why you MUST believe in Jesus, for Christian superiority over other faiths.

This is the verse that can prop up Christian arrogance—the litmus test for who is going to heaven or hell.

Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Do you believe in him? This is your password to salvation.

John's gospel is the gospel of 14:6

“I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the father except through me.”

These are powerful, unequivocal statements. But what does it say about generations of Christians since Jesus walked on earth that these statements have been used to justify a narrowing of truth, a narrowing of the gate to eternity?

Truth be told, John's gospel was more about expanding, opening, reaching into communities and into hearts that had yet to really know the power of being up close to Jesus. This gospel writer confronts us all with Jesus' power to change lives, to change the world.

These unequivocal statements of truth can feel really comforting, especially to those who are marginalized, to those who are ridiculed for their beliefs. And to those being told their faith identity has no validity.

The community that received John's gospel was trying to find some spiritual traction. The generation of Jesus followers after Jesus' death did not have a lot of social capital in their culture.

They were increasingly disorientated— and in the community that received the Gospel of John there was a particular layer of hostility coming from various sectors of Jewish leaders as they were trying to regain social traction after the destruction of the synagogue. These Jews were no longer defined by that sacred space and so they entrench their identity in the authority of the written word, in doctrinal consistency and that codified authority became central to their sense of self.

It is no coincidence that the gospel writer, John, uses the Word, LOGOS, as the way to describe Jesus—and people receiving this gospel were increasingly equating Jesus' words with the authority of written Holy Scripture, Torah. Jesus, the incarnate word, the embodiment of word, would have been profoundly troubling to the People of the Book.

He was outside the lines, generating truth in his very cells, in his radical acts of compassion, in his very person, in his questioning of hallowed ways of doing things.

John is very concerned with truth and with the way Jesus reveals the nature of truth itself to people who are struggling to find their footing.

Fast forward through Constantine who joined together the power of the state with adherence to Christianity, through Athanasius in the 4th century who wanted to silence all dissenting voices and so created orthodoxy backed up with the threat of excommunication and even death for non-conformists...

Fast forward through the appropriation of Christianity by political power-brokers in the Western world, even Nazi Germany, and lest we not forget, the founders of the United States of America...

Fast forward from the flailing Jesus community of John's day to the power-entrenched institutionalized Christianity of the Western world and this unequivocal truth the John gave to his struggling community takes on a very different tone.

Backed by social capital and political power, these truth claims becomes for many a weapon of judgment, this naming and absolutizing truth becomes a tool of the powerful, not a protector of God's nature or of Jesus' call to those who find the courage to follow him.

And now we Christians have become dangerously close to being reduced down to People of the Book instead of people of a living, breathing, incarnate God who disrupts and creates truth right before our very eyes.

Biblical idolatry is one of the greatest threats of the integrity of the Jesus following movement that there is today.

And Jesus can become someone barely recognizable—distorted by the powerful, seized away from the oppressed to prop up systems that exclude and ways of

thinking that are far from the healing ways of the Jesus who healed and wept and spoke truth to power, and the Jesus who walks alongside and holds us in the dark.

What is truth when this Jesus becomes obscured by those who claim to know him the best?

Pilate's question to Jesus' face, just hours before his execution by a world that bought its own lies about him... This question reverberates in our time: "What is truth?"

Just a few months ago, I was asking myself that same question. I could not imagine a church like Grace Covenant existed. After each interview with the PNC, I would say to John... That went really well... But this is too good to be true.

I figured the truth would come out sooner or later about this church—that your professed theological curiosity and desire to stretch would prove farcical as it does for many faith communities who say they want to stretch and be challenged. Sure we want to be challenged, as long as everything can stay the way we like it!

But with every conversation, with every next step, your PNC and I told each other the truth about ourselves and there was more and more freedom, more and more room, more and more vitality. Those are the marks of truth—freedom, space to truly be ourselves, and vitality. I began to feel a potent trust for this call surfacing between us.

And something I thought could never be true became truth right before my eyes. This is a truth that my family has staked our lives on. We would only have staked our lives on a truth that we believe is Christ led.

What is truth? It is a dynamic, life-changing, pack up all your belongings, and take a leap of faith reality that shows itself in ways that we often don't expect.

Facts, stats, science, eye-witness testimony—these are what we prefer to trust as the inviolable sources of truth that we can trust?

But these things can kids us into believing truth is just a fact away from being discovered. And these things can distort our capacity to see the way Jesus' truth is standing right in front of us.

Facts don't seem to matter like they use to, a troubling reality in many ways. But, even if we cling to our commitment to facts, how dependable are they? There are plenty of studies out there that tell us human beings take in facts that cohere to

what we already think and we tend to reject facts that don't support our worldview. We see what we want to see. We believe what we want to believe.

And science is a great window into the world, but is not a slam-dunk either when it comes to settled truth. Just look at how we keep learning new things that change the settled science we thought we could trust—I still haven't accepted that Pluto is not a planet. It ruins the trick I had for memorizing the planets: My Very Energetic Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas

Losing the Pizzas just takes all the fun out of it for me.

And eye-witness testimony has also lost its cultural luster. 100 people can remember the same situation 100 different ways, especially when chaos, violence, and trauma are a part of the experience.

At every turn, reality is interpreted, filtered through different perspectives. This is not a sign of the times; this is the nature of reality—the same nature of reality that existed when Jesus and Pilate stood face to face with this question. What is truth?

Are we left with relativism? Are we left with only a numberless cacophony of personal perspectives?

Jeremiah laments the people's lack of belief—the prophet's voice seems conflated with God's.

There is a tragic quality to the human condition—the way we distort and contort truth, the way we expect faith and belief to work can make us our own worst enemy.

In an ironic twist the more we cling to the truths we want to believe are static and unchanging, the more we insist on truth that transcends context, the more we crowd out the way God lives and breathes in every moment, the way God startles us with truth we didn't expect to see.

The Gospel of John tells us belief does matter. And our lives do change the closer we get to Jesus and the more clearly we can see his truth.

But Jesus' truth was never static, it was never about dogma or doctrine or unchanging words on a page.

Jesus' truth is about relationships, connections.

Jesus was a healer. And he still is today. His truth makes itself known in real lives, in bodies, in cells, in breath, in unlikely moments of connection and grace.

Jesus', the way, the truth, the life comes alive when we let him fill us with a sense of possibility, a sense of justice, a sense of mercy, when we let him fill us with the capacity to respond, to regenerate, and to stay connected to life even when we can't see any good reason to believe.

His promise to us, the truth he gives us is that if we stay close to him, we are close to a way of being alive that never dies. We know this truth by its affects—in the ways it moves us, in the ways it changes, even redeems a moment in time that seemed irredeemable to us.

What is truth at the Veterans Restoration Quarters when you are face to face with a young veteran who is living with PTSD?

What is truth at ABCCM when you sit down with someone whose needs seem infinite?

What is truth in the garden out front?

What is truth when you sit vigil at the bedside of a dying friend? When you comfort a teenager who is weighed down by the burdens of life? When you breathe with someone who is fighting their own demons? When you teach a child to tie her shoe?

What is truth when we decide to stay present in a conflict, when we stay in community even when we disagree?

Truth is lived into. It is created; it is generated when we trust our lives to be the handiwork of a God who shows us truth in the flesh of a new born baby and a man executed on a cross and a man who freely showed us his wounds and has always proved trustworthy when we find the courage to show him ours.

If we have the eyes to see, Christ he is standing right in front of us showing us the way, telling us truth, a truth that sometimes comes in disguise.

That's the God's Honest Truth.

How will we participate in the way truth unfolds, Grace Covenant, are we willing to respond to Christ's call in this place, in this time? Do we have the courage to participate in the way truth takes hold in our world today through what we do, through who we are?

We don't have all the answers. Being called to truth is not about having all the answers. It's more like a first violin inviting a symphony to tune itself, each instrument makes itself ready to participate in something beautiful coming into its own.

Truth is more like that, than it is a static fact or a book of non-negotiables.

Christ's is calling us, Grace Covenant, toward this living, breathing truth. May we make ourselves ready to recognize when it is right in front of us.

Thanks be to God.