

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

John 18:33-38

Lee and Gary head out to the golf course for a quick nine holes. On the first tee, Lee turns to Gary and says, "What do you say we make this time worth something. Play you for \$5?" Gary agrees, and they start their rounds. It's a great game, and the two lifelong friends reach the No. 9 tee box with Gary ahead by one stroke. After Lee hits a great drive, right down the middle, Gary steps up and promptly hooks a ball into deep rough and trees. "C'mon," Gary says to Lee, "help me find my ball. I'll look in this patch of trees, and you look around over there." They look and look and look, but no ball can be found. The five-minute time limit on searching for lost balls is about to run out. Gary gets desperate. He gives a quick glance over to Lee to see if he is looking, then swiftly reaches into his pocket and drops a new ball into the rough. "Found my ball!" Gary shouts out triumphantly. Lee looks at his friend with great disappointment. "After all the years we've been friends," Lee says, "you'd cheat me at golf for a measly five bucks?" "What do you mean cheat?" Gary asks indignantly. "I found my ball sitting right here!" Lee lets out a heavy sigh. "And you'd lie to me, too? All for a tiny little sum of money? You'd cheat me and lie to me, for what? For five bucks? I can't believe you'd stoop so low." "Well what makes you so sure I'm cheating and lying, anyway?" Gary asks. "Because," Lee replies, "I've been standing on your ball for the last five minutes!"

What is Truth? At no other time in my life has telling the truth been so abused. You turn on the news to learn of some new scandal only to find it hotly disputed the very next day by a publicist close to the person.

"Fake news," is the hot new phrase which I find somewhat interesting, because we have long been faced with news reports reporting completely opposite accounts of the same situation. They cannot both be the truth. Never before has it been more important to be a person of integrity; someone who is not afraid to tell the truth, live the truth and accept the truth even if it reflects badly on them. What is integrity? It is what you do when no one's looking.

Golfer Ray Floyd, in contention for a golf championship some time ago, addressed the ball to putt it into the cup. The ball moved. Although no one had noticed, he called the penalty on himself, bogied the hole and lost the championship.

In the 1980s in Columbus, Ohio, an armored car spilled \$2,000,000 on the freeway. Only \$400,000 was ever recovered; the rest disappeared with the throngs of people who stopped and scooped up the cash. Some folks were honest enough to return what wasn't theirs: Melvin Kaiser gave back \$57,000.

And integrity comes in all sizes and ages. At a national spelling contest in Washington an incident occurred that beautifully illustrates this. In the fourth round of the contest, Rosalie Elliot, an 11 year old from South Carolina was asked to spell avowal. In her soft Southern accent, she spelled it. But did the seventh grader use an "a" or an "e" as the next to the last letter? The judges could

not decide. For several minutes they listened to the tape recording playbacks, but the critical letter was accent-blurred. The Chief Judge finally put the question to the only person who knew the answer, "Was the letter an "a" or an "e?" he asked Rosalie. Surrounded by whispering young spellers, she knew by now the correct spelling of the word. Without hesitating, she replied she had misspelled it, and exited the stage.

Even Jesus is getting in on the truth action. This morning is Christ the King Sunday and we read and hear this conversation between Jesus and Pilate. On first hearing this, one might be a little confused since the conversation takes place nearing the end of Jesus' life when he is on trial just before his crucifixion. Shouldn't this text be used during Holy Week just before Easter Sunday? Well today is the end of the Liturgical year, with the first Sunday of Advent ushering in the new year and weeks leading up to Christmas when we celebrate the coming of Baby Jesus, so it is indeed fitting that we remember King Jesus who went to the cross for us and as we move forward to the time of year when he came to us in the form of a newborn. In the church year, we have come full circle.

Pilate has both asked a question and essentially made a statement in verse 37, "So, you are a king?" Jesus responds, "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice." Pilate then asks, "What is truth?" And Jesus says nothing. If he did respond to the question, we don't know about it, because John doesn't tell us. Perhaps Jesus simply said nothing because he sensed that it was a rhetorical question, i.e., a question of frustration coming from a guy under political pressure. "What is truth?" is a question that politicians -- it could be argued -- have trouble with.

It's more likely that Jesus didn't respond because he knew Pilate wasn't really looking for the truth. Pilate wasn't looking for what was true, but for what was expedient, i.e., what was least likely to cause a riot in the streets, and a phone call from the governor. Pilate was desperately looking for a loophole to wash his hands of Jesus and the disciples.

But, Jesus' reluctance to answer a question about truth has not stopped preachers from trying to answer a question Jesus decided to leave unanswered! And that's not necessarily a bad thing, nor is it particularly a hard thing to do. Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus makes plenty of statements about God's truth:

- that God loves us,
- that God wants us to be reconciled to him,
- that believing in Jesus is the way to salvation,
- that God's kingdom is not like earthly kingdoms,
- that we should love God and our neighbors as ourselves,
- God's word is truth (17:17),
- and, of course, the big one, that Jesus himself is "the way, the truth and the life" (14:6).

So the question, "What is truth?" is not one that's impossible to answer. (Homiletics online, 2015) What is difficult, but not impossible, to deal with is Jesus' statement that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (v. 37). That Jesus chose the word "belongs" rather than "corners" is significant. He didn't say, "Everyone who corners the truth listens to my voice." This kind of a person -- the one who's convinced he's got a corner on the truth -- is not only a scary person, but a dangerous one. Proverbs 21:2 comes to mind: "A person may think their own ways are right, but the LORD weighs the heart" (NIV).

Jesus says that everyone who belongs to him "listens to his voice." This is not the first time Jesus has said this. Check out John 10 where he talks about being the Good Shepherd.

- "The sheep hear his voice," Jesus says in verse 3.
- "The sheep follow him because they know his voice," (v. 4).
- "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice," (v. 16).
- Finally, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me," (v. 27).

Therefore, to "belong to the truth" and to "listen to Jesus' voice" is to be a member of the flock over which Jesus is the shepherd. And in that day, "shepherd" was a frequent metaphor for "king," which does explain Pilate's query, "So you are a king?"

When looking at Jesus' words it is important that we understand that Jesus is not speaking about an earthly kingdom – Jesus comes from and belongs to God's kingdom. And, the truth of God's kingdom is shown by the lives of Christians. Certainly, we can cite many instances of good deeds being done, of people caring for "the least of these." Those doing such acts are often motivated by listening to Jesus' voice. We are living out the truth of God's kingdom here on earth when we operate a weekly food pantry; work with establishing a ministry to middle school age children and teens with the Secret Boutique; put together gifts for people in nursing homes, receive a love offering for people in need, buy a bed for a child who has none...etc.

We are also living into the truth of Jesus' words when we:

- We show love for one another (John 13:34-35).
- We pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44-45).
- We "take up our cross" (Matthew 16:24-25).
- We pray (Luke 21:36).
- We forgive (Matthew 18:22).
- We do not seek revenge on those who have wronged us (Matthew 5:38-42).
- We do not seek the favor and applause of the public (Matthew 6:1-4).
- We are not consumed with worry and anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34).
- We do not judge others (Matthew 7:1-5).

Sometimes church people are just downright legalistic. They lose the essence of the gospel in a long list of petty rules and regulations. Tony Campolo tells the story of a friend of his who lives next door to a Seventh-Day-Adventist woman, about being confronted by her on Saturday morning as he was cutting the grass on his front lawn. As you may know, Saturday is the Sabbath

for Adventists. The woman said in an abrupt, condemning way, “It’s the Sabbath! You are cutting grass on the Sabbath!” The friend, trying to defend himself, sheepishly responded, “Well, Jesus picked corn on the Sabbath,” to which the woman shot back, “Two wrongs don’t make a right!”

Jesus, the gospels tell us — is the way, the truth and the life. That’s the truth that Pilate missed in effort to relieve himself from having to deal with Jesus. It may be that we, too, miss this truth when we become so pressured by difficult choices that we forget, or never notice, that Christ is standing within us, beside us and among us as he told us he would. In life we are not abandoned. God is present always.

It’s in the hard places in our lives that we must ask the tough questions while seeking godly truth. Then we should listen to the answers, weigh the evidence, judge and act — just like Pilate. Only let us sincerely strive for the truth-seeking.

In the end, Pilate gave Jesus over to the whims of the furious rabble. He did the politically expedient thing. He kept the peace. Maybe he prevented a riot. He believed he had done the right thing.

That’s where Pilate and the rest of us are similar. When we are presented with life’s difficult choices, we may choose to be practical rather than do what is ultimately right. Making the right choice isn’t always easy or popular. But is it Christian?

The late Eugene Peterson has this to say about Christian practice: The gospel life isn't something we learn ABOUT and then put together with instructions from the manufacturer; it's something we BECOME as God does his work of creation and salvation in us and as we accustom ourselves to a life of belief and obedience and prayer. Truth is not a definition, it is a way of life. Truth is being willing to go against what is popular and instead doing what is right in the eyes of God. As followers of Jesus, our lives should always be about becoming more and more the people God wants us to be.

Friends this is what it means to live into the truth of Jesus Christ. Jesus IS the truth, and you and I are to become imitators of Christ the King. When in doubt, we only need to look at Jesus’ words from Matthew 25:35-36, “When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.