

John 18:33-38a (NRSV)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. 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." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we go through life, the truth keeps changing. Not necessarily *what* is true, although that does change often enough, but rather, what truth *is*.

When I was very young, truth meant "honesty," the answer to the demand from my parents or my teachers, "Tell me the truth." In this respect, truth became the enemy. Truth became an accusation. "Did you break the lamp? Tell me the truth." "Did you do your homework? Tell me the truth." The speaker is implying that you would not tell the truth, or already had not told the truth. And, of course, my reply would always be, "I *am* telling the truth." Sometimes, that even was the truth, but that ushers in a new definition of "truth."

As I got a little older, truth became "description," a statement or a proposition that was universally valid. "The sky is blue" is a true

statement if the sky really is blue, and is not true if the sky is not blue. “We hold these truths to be self-evident ...” is not a statement that has much to do with honesty, but has everything to do with a universally valid statement of description – all men are created equal, and so on. But as we get older, most of the things that are true this way are either not very interesting or not very universal. So, for example, the statement that “all men are created equal” is not entirely valid –all men are *not* actually equal in some things that are important. And it’s not universal – what about women? Are all men and all women created equal to each other? But that ushers in a different definition of “truth.”

And so, as I got a little older, truth became “insight,” as we looked for statements that somehow captured the hidden reality of things. Now, by this time I was in high school or college or even at the beginning of my academic career, and I was in the business of finding out and revealing things that are hidden, and doing this required training and tools and research. And so, for example, we discovered, or thought we discovered that everything – culture, religion, art, literature – was really nothing but economics, and the class structure dictated all other manners and habits of life. But we also discovered that truth as “insight” was true only if your listener shared your insight, and not otherwise. And we began to see that truth was in the eye of the beholder, and that ushered in a new definition of “truth.”

And so, as I got a little older, now, not much younger than I am now, truth became “outlook.” What is true for me may not be true for you and in the language of post-modernism, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” There is no common definition of what is true, but rather as many different definitions of truth as there are “outlooks” and now the operative conversation begins, “from my perspective ...” and all perspectives seem to be equally valid. If it seems like we’ve cycled back to “truth as honesty” – tell me the truth, now, well, there is some truth to that, too.

All of these definitions and confusions about them are operating in today's Gospel lesson. The scene, on one level, is a trial, Jesus' trial before Pilate, the procurator who rules Palestine for the Romans. And a trial is a place where the truth is established.

Pilate, it seems, wants the truth. He comes to Jesus and asks him a straightforward question – “Are you the King of the Jews?” But Jesus sees right through this – he asks, is this really your question or did someone get you to ask it? Now this is crucially important, for a couple of reasons. If Pilate is asking on behalf of the people who are accusing Jesus of wanting to, or more importantly of *not* wanting to set up a kingdom in opposition to the Romans, then there's one answer. If Pilate is asking from a different perspective, then there's another answer.

Pilate answers Jesus' question, which was after all, in response to Pilate's first question, with, now, a third question – “Am I a Jew?” Clearly, the truth is a slippery thing, the way these two are dancing around it. But Pilate's question has given away something important – he is implicitly saying that he is not asking his own question, but rather asking the question of those who want Jesus dead. Again, remember that when the Gospel of John talks about “the Jews” quote, unquote, he's really talking about some of the Jews, the ones who doubt Jesus and want him dead. In this sense, Pilate is one of them.

Pilate goes on – “Your people handed you over to me. What did you do to get them so mad?” Jesus seems to answer a different question, but I think he is really answering the question that was asked. “What did I do? I offered them a kingdom that is not from this world, and that's not what they wanted.”

Now, Pilate had a good question he could have asked – “So, how is your kingdom different from the one they wanted?” But you see, Pilate really is one of the doubters – he understands kingdom the way the doubters do. He understands kingdom as a structure of power that obeys the dynamics of this world. And so, he asks, “So

you are a king?” Yes or no. But Jesus knows that answering this question incorporates their misunderstanding of what a kingdom is, so he refuses to answer it in exactly the way Pilate wants. “You say so,” he says, “but I came into the world to testify to the truth. Those who belong to the truth listen to my voice.”

Now, we’re ready to hear the truth, we think. Jesus will tell us the truth and the truth will set us free. But, what happens next is frustrating. Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Now, wait a minute, this is a trial – the whole point is to get to the truth. But now it’s clear that Pilate doesn’t really want the truth. Pilate wants an answer that fits into his world, a world where there is a king who is in charge, who decides who is up and who is down, who wins and who loses, who lives and who dies. Pilate wants to know whether Jesus thinks he is a king like that, because if he does, then his doubters are right and he can be put to death, because there is only one king and that is Caesar.

But Jesus won’t say whether he thinks he is a king like that, so Pilate is not interested in Jesus’ answer. “What is truth?” he asks, mainly to stop the conversation. It’s all a matter of perspective, Pilate says.

Now, Jesus could have made it easier for us, because we think we are ready for the answer. Jesus could have made it easier for us, right here, or John’s Gospel could have. John, or Jesus could have extended the conversation and told us what the truth is, right here. But Jesus isn’t really interested in making it easy for us, because the truth isn’t *something*, exactly – it is *someone*. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus has told the disciples, that he *is* the Truth. Here he says he testifies to the Truth, because he is testifying to God and he and God are one. Earlier in the Gospel he says that he is the Good Shepherd and those who belong to him hear his voice and follow him. Here he says, those who belong to the truth belong to me and follow my voice.

None of the earlier definitions of truth I gave – truth as “honesty,” as “description,” as “insight” or as “perspective” – none of them fit the most fundamental sense of truth in this passage. Because truth in the biblical sense is not neutral – it is God’s care for us, for you and for me. Truth is not unemotional – it is God’s declaration of love for us and for creation. And truth is not static and unchanging – truth is dynamic, not about who we are but who we are becoming. Truth in this deeply biblical sense is “faithful, transformative love” and God in Christ is Truth because God in Christ is the essence of “faithful,” “transformative” and “loving.”

You see, in all the other definitions of truth -- as honesty, or description or insight or perspective -- we think of truth as “out there,” in the world as a correspondence between something that *is* and something that we say or think or feel. We get that from the philosophy of the Greeks that forms the basis for Western thought. But truth in the *biblical* sense is relational, it is a demand, a choice, a voice that we follow, a way of living faithfully. Truth is more a verb than a noun. Because Truth is fundamentally not “out there” but rather *for us*, not for how we are but for how we can become, how we will become, through love, and not our love but God’s love.

Pilate doesn’t get this, *can’t* get this, because Pilate wants to know whether Jesus is a king, a thing in the world, and Jesus is saying, “My kingdom is not from this world,” a place in opposition to people, but rather I am *for you*, I am the Good Shepherd, absolutely faithful, absolutely transformative, absolutely loving. And that is not of this world. And that is the truth.

On Christ the King Sunday, here at the end of the church year, we celebrate Christ. We celebrate the Truth. We celebrate faithful, transformative love. For Us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.