

1 Timothy 6:11-16

John 18:28 - 19:16

March 13, 2016

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? CRUCIFYING THE TRUTH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Several years ago, a friend who knows I keep a quote journal handed me a folded piece of paper and said, “Here’s a good quote for you to put in your journal.” When I opened the piece of paper, I read this: “The problem with internet quotes is that you can’t always depend on their accuracy.” (Abraham Lincoln, 1864) That’s such a good quote, I had to write it in my journal!

In this day of instant communication, how do you verify the truth of various claims? As Abraham Lincoln tells us, it’s not enough to say, “I saw it on the internet, so it must be true!”

There are many “fact-checking” websites, such as **snopes.com** which is advertised as “the best place to make sure you didn’t fall for an urban legend, folklore, myth, rumor, or other misinformation spread online. Snopes knows Coke will not dissolve your teeth, there is no law in Arizona specifically forbidding camel-hunting, the Great Wall of China is not the only man-made object visible from the moon, and much more.”

Then there is **FactCheck.org**, which states, “When talking about checking facts, the political arena is hard to exclude. . . FactCheck.org [is] a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. FactCheck.org describes itself as ‘a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception in U.S. politics.’”

Speaking of politics, the common wisdom is not to do it! Charles Schulz, the creative genius behind the Peanuts cartoon, said, “There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people . . . Religion, Politics, and The Great Pumpkin.” Ann Post, the great-great-granddaughter of the etiquette expert Emily Post, wrote in an article entitled “The Etiquette of Talking Politics,” “Not everyone can pick a fish fork out of the cutlery line up, but most of America made it through childhood with a few ground rules of inviolable etiquette in place: say please and thank you; don’t chew with your mouth open; cut the price tag off a gift; if you can’t say anything nice, talk about the weather. Just don’t, for goodness sake, ever talk about politics or religion at the dinner table!”¹

Well, today’s gospel story ignores that advice and brings politics and religion face to face in the persons of Pontius Pilate, the fifth prefect/governor of the Roman province of Judea, and Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God become flesh. Here, at the intersection of religion and politics, we hear once again the question of this Lenten season, “Who do you say that I am?” This time the question comes to us through the back-

and-forth conversation between Pilate and Jesus, and is even heard in Pilate's question, "What is truth?"

In a sermon he calls "The Truth of Stories," Frederick Buechner writes, ". . . the silence that has always most haunted me is the silence of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate asks his famous question, 'What is truth?', and Jesus answers him with a silence that is overwhelming in its eloquence. In case there should be any question as to what that silence meant, on another occasion Jesus put it into words for his disciple Thomas. 'I,' he said, 'I am the truth.'

"Jesus did not say that religion was the truth, or that his own teachings were the truth, or that what people taught about him was the truth, or that the Bible was the truth, or the church, or any system of ethics or theological doctrine. There are individual truths in all of them, we hope and believe, but individual truths were not what Pilate was after, or what you and I are after either . . . Truths about this or that are a dime a dozen, including religious truths. THE truth is what Pilate is after: the truth about who we are and who God is if there is a God, the truth about life, the truth about death, the truth about truth itself. That is the truth all of us are after.

"It is a truth that can never be put into words because no words can contain it. It is a truth that can never be caught in any doctrine or creed including our own because it will never stay still long enough but is always moving and shifting like air. It is a truth that is always beckoning us in different ways and coming at us from different directions."²

THE Truth was standing right in front of Pontius Pilate, and he couldn't make up his mind. Pilate went out to the religious leaders (18:29). Then Pilate entered his headquarters again (18:33). Then Pilate went out to the Jews again (18:38). Then Pilate went in to see Jesus (19:1). Then Pilate went out again to the Jews (19:4). Then Pilate went into his headquarters again and questioned Jesus (19:9). Then Pilate took Jesus outside and presented him to the Jews, and said, "Here is your King! (19:13-14). Pontius Pilate quite literally — and figuratively — went back-and-forth about Jesus. But the final word in today's story is "crucified" — "Then he handed him over to them to be crucified." (19:16)

One of our theology professors in seminary told us, "Sin — it's not necessary, but it's inevitable." One of the characters in William Faulkner's novel, *Requiem for a Nun*, has this to say about sin: "You ain't got to. You can't help it." In today's monologue before the sermon, "Pontius Pilate" said, "Three times I tried to release Him. But these people were relentless! I had no choice." Really? Pontius Pilate had no choice? Remember the last verse of the story — "Then he handed him over to them to be crucified." It sounds like Pilate made his choice — about a pesky religious problem, about a potential political risk, about truth, about THE Truth himself.

Pontius Pilate "ain't got to, but he can't help it." Historically, Pilate was not an admirable character. He served as governor of Judea for ten years. He committed religious atrocities that offended the Jewish people. He had to back down in the face of

furious protests from his subject people. He was eventually recalled from his duties as governor because he ordered the massacre of some Samaritans. You know things aren't good when even the Romans think you've crossed the line!

So, is Pontius Pilate a sympathetic figure in this story? Is he a poor man caught in the middle of a domestic religious squabble? Or is he a cynical political ruler, just doing his job? Pilate's job was to keep the peace during the Passover Festival. He apparently wasn't too interested in or concerned about Jesus, as long as the dispute had to do with religion. However, once the religious charges against Jesus took on a political tone, the die was cast. When the crowd said to Pilate, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor," Pilate apparently made his decision — and it was a decision based on political expediency and self-preservation.

John's gospel is full of irony and double-meanings and deep symbolism. As Pilate goes "back-and-forth" about what to do with Jesus, he offers the crowd a substitute named Barabbas, whose name can be translated "son of the father." In Matthew's gospel, Pilate asks the crowd, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" How ironic! John tells us Barabbas was a "bandit." Another way to translate that charge against Barabbas is "insurrectionist or rebel." While Pontius Pilate interrogates Jesus, the true Son of the Father, about the nature and threat of his kingdom because he is worried about the potential threat to Rome and his own skin, Pilate is ready, willing, and able to release Barabbas, "son of the father," a known danger to the empire.

So, what is truth? Is truth the power and might of the empire? Or is it the truth embodied in a man who stands silent before the empire's representative? A colleague writes, "[Pilate asks] 'What is truth?' when the one who is 'the way, and the truth, and the life' is standing right before him." And that is why this story about Pontius Pilate is relevant to you and me today when we hear Jesus ask, "Who do you say that I am?"

Legends abound about what happened to Pontius Pilate and his wife, Claudia Procula. Historically, we know Pilate was summoned to Rome, accused of excessive cruelty, and exiled to France. However, in some parts of the early church, stories began to circulate about Pilate's remorse and grief and repentance for his part in Jesus' death. He is said to have petitioned Emperor Tiberius not to mistreat Christians. Pilate is said to have painted a picture of Jesus. He was counted among one of the prophets by some Christian writers because of his refusal to condemn Jesus.

No one really knows what happened to Pilate. Some stories say he committed suicide out of remorse. Other stories say Pilate was eventually martyred for his faith in Jesus, even being crucified on Jesus' cross. So, even in this case we can ask, "What is truth?" We do know, however, that the Abyssinian Coptic Orthodox Church (Ethiopia) canonized Pilate as a saint in the 6th century and assigned June 25 as a feast day.³

I suppose you'll have to make up your minds about Pontius Pilate — good guy or bad guy? Sympathetic to Jesus or self-serving? Someone in Bible study said, "He

sounds like a man who was just doing his job.” Now that’s the truth! Someone has noted that “In Pilate, we seem to have a functionary who sympathizes with Jesus but has to operate within the limits of his responsibilities, who is uncertain of a truth that would complicate his duties and allegiances.”⁴

That’s why this story is important for you and me in this Lenten season. Since Jesus told Thomas, “I am the truth,” we might rewrite the last verse of today’s story to read, “Then he handed the Truth over to them to be crucified.” What do we do when the Truth “complicates our duties and allegiances”? How do we “operate within the limits of our responsibilities” when the Truth puts claims upon us that might turn our world upside down? How will we answer when the Truth stands right in front of us and says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it”? (Mark 8:34-35) How do we crucify the Truth with our decisions and indecision?

In the rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Pontius Pilate sings “Pilate’s Dream,” which goes like this:

*I dreamt I met a Galilean
A most amazing man
He had that look you very rarely find
The haunting, hunted kind
I asked to him say what had happened, how it all began
I asked again; he never said a word
As if he hadn’t heard
And next the room was full of wild and angry men
They seemed to hate this man
They fell on him and then
They disappeared again
Then I saw thousands of millions crying for this man
And then I heard them mentioning my name
And leaving me the blame*

Then Pilate confronts Jesus and sings,

*Where are you from, Jesus? What do you want, Jesus?
Tell me! You’ve got to be careful!
You could be dead soon! Could well be!
Why do you not speak when I hold your life in my hands?
How can you stay quiet?
I don’t believe you understand!*

But it was Pilate who didn't understand! For the Truth himself stood before the governor and said, "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." (John 18:37)

The Truth calls you and me and says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32)

Let us pray: Gracious God, we are overwhelmed by your love which goes to the cross for us, endures the grave, and leads us to new life. By your Spirit, lead us into your truth and strengthen us to be faithful disciples in Christ's service. Amen.

Congregational Response

*Christ's disciples, weak with fear,
fail one further, stringent test —
so like us, with trouble near —
fleeing at his arrest.
Shadows lengthen into night.*

NOTES

¹Anna Post, "The Etiquette of Talking Politics," November 17, 2011 at www.huffingtonpost.com.

²Frederick Buechner, "Weekly Sermon Illustration: The Truth," at www.frederickbuechner.com.

³Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States, "Questions & Answers," at www.sus-copts.org.

⁴Jerry Ryan, "Saint Pontius Pilate?" October 21, 2013 at www.commonwealmagazine.com.