

SERMON 031118 4th Sunday in Lent—B
“What Is Truth?”
John 3:14-21

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March 11, 2018

We know that Lent is a time of repentance, but it is also a time of decision. Although not a part of our reading this morning, the crisis of decision is clear in Jesus' perplexing nighttime discussion with Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, is an example of those captivated with Jesus by the signs and miracles that he is performing, but by his nighttime appearance, we see that he is struggling with coming into the light. He affirms that the signs Jesus performs can only come from God, but before he can ask a question, Jesus takes the conversation in a completely different direction. He tells Nicodemus that true faith requires more than simply a belief in works. Jesus tells him that to see the kingdom of God, to enter the light of Christ, he has to be born again or born from above. Nicodemus misunderstands, so Jesus gives him a more thorough explanation.

Jesus begins by drawing a comparison to an incident during the Exodus, that you heard about in the first reading. He talks about Moses lifting up a snake in the wilderness so that all who look upon it might be saved from poisonous snakebites. In the same way, the Son of Man must be "lifted up" so "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus goes on to say those words that have become so well-known among Christians, and have often been called, "The Gospel in a Nutshell: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Now, without looking it up, can anyone tell me what the next several lines of our Gospel reading describe? I'll give you a hint—Light and Dark. (Pause) John loves to talk about the Light of God vs. the Darkness of Sin.

Why hasn't Jesus come to condemn? Because those who don't believe have already condemned themselves. They have embraced the darkness. And those who walk in the light? They already believe, and are saved from condemnation.

Then Jesus goes on to describe those who come to the light: *“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”* This is the verse that intrigues me. *“...those who do what is true...”*

The concepts of truth and absolute truth have always intrigued me. Whenever the topic comes up, my brain switches into high gear. Truth—What is true when it comes to God? How do we do what is true? What truths do we accept? What truths do we reject? Is all truth relative—as some proclaim? How important is the truth to us?

In an article entitled, Beliefs of a United Methodist Christian, I read the following: *A prison chaplain writes of a study in which he talked with twelve inmates in the penitentiary. He asked*

each "Why are you here?" The answers were instructive: "I was framed." "They ganged up on me." "It was a case of mistaken identity." "The police had it in for me." Not one said he was guilty of something. {In their minds,} they were all innocent.

I found this blurb interesting because when I served as a prison chaplain, I never once came across an inmate who denied committing the crime for which he was incarcerated. Why was coming to terms with the truth more important for one group of inmates that it was for the other?

Every year around this time—just before Easter, my wife and I like to listen to the original Broadway recording of Jesus Christ Superstar. One particular section always gives me chills, and that is Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. I would like to share with you a portion of that section.

Jesus says, "I look for truth, and find that I get damned."

Pilate responds with, "And, what is truth? Is truth unchanging law? We both have truths. Are mine the same as yours?"

Frederick Buechner addresses this exchange in his book Wishful Thinking: *WHEN JESUS SAYS that he has come to bear witness to the truth, Pilate asks, "What is truth?" Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, it is possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat. Instead of truth, Pilate has only expedience. His decision to throw Jesus to the wolves is expedient. Pilate views humankind as alone in the universe with nothing but its own courage and ingenuity to see it through. That is enough to choke up anybody.*

Pilate asks "What is truth?" and for years there have been politicians, scientists, theologians, philosophers, poets, and so on to tell him. The sound they make is like the sound of crickets chirping.

But, Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question. He just stands there.

Buechner goes on to say, in his book, *Secrets in the Dark*:

But the silence that has always most haunted me is the silence of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate asks his famous question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), 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" (14:6).

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, unless I miss my guess. 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 we are all of us after.

To answer Pilate's question, "What is truth?" John MacArthur offers this definition, drawn from Scripture:

Truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of God. Even more to the point: truth is the self-expression of God....

Sounds like a good description of Jesus, doesn't it?

Jesus tells us that he is The Truth. We regard ourselves as children of the light—which means that, according to Jesus, we believe we are doing what is true. If Buechner tells us that "*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 was the truth,*" then what are we doing that is true? How do we do TRUTH?

I believe that if Jesus is the TRUTH, as he told us he is, then the only way to do what is true is to do what Jesus would do. But, we have to go beyond simply doing. It is more than doing what Jesus taught, but it is being the presence of Jesus in the world. Not just the hands, but the heart. Not just pity, but compassion. Not just tolerance, but love. Only then can it be truly said that we are doing what is true in the eyes of God.

Lent is the perfect time for us to recommit ourselves—as individuals, and as a congregation—to live out our faith in ways that are true to the way Jesus ministered to others and are glorifying to God. AMEN