

To Tell the Truth

As a child I remember watching a game show called “To Tell the Truth.” Celebrity guests were introduced to three people all claiming to be the same person. The celebrities would ask questions of three similar men or women and try to determine who was telling the truth, who was actually the person he or she claimed to be. The imposters would win prize money for stumping the celebrities and winning their votes, so the imposters were rewarded for not telling the truth, but it was all in good fun. It was only a game, after all.

Today’s text picks up immediately after last week’s. With Peter’s third denial and the cock’s crow lingering in our ears, Jesus is brought before Pilate. Even if we aren’t all that clear about who Pilate is, his name is probably familiar because we say it every time we recite the Apostles’ Creed. When we say the creed together, we remember that Jesus “suffered under Pontious Pilate.” So each time we say these words, we rehearse the story of Jesus’ life the same way the early church did, and Pilate—of all people—becomes part of the church’s baptismal liturgy, part of who we say we are and what we say we believe.

Pilate is not a permanent fixture in Jerusalem. As the Roman governor of Judea, his home base is Caesarea Maritima on the coast of the Mediterranean, a cosmopolitan Roman city with a theater and a stadium. He is here in Jerusalem to keep things under control during the Passover. He needs to make sure the Jewish people remember that Rome is in charge and that Rome holds the power, especially in the midst of a festival celebrating their ancestors’

God-given liberation from another empire.¹ Rome and Pilate do not want the people to get any ideas that Caesar and Rome might go the way of Pharaoh and Egypt. We meet Pilate as the religious authorities look to hand off the troublemaker Jesus. They want him to be Rome's problem, not theirs. We then watch Pilate play the game as he shuttles back and forth between Jesus and the religious authorities. As a religious leader in an occupied nation, Caiaphas does not have the power to put anyone to death by crucifixion. That is the state's job, and he would be happy for the state to do that job on his behalf in this case. He would prefer to wash his hands of this disruptive and disturbing itinerant preacher who refuses to play by the religious establishment's rules. While we often refer to this episode as a trial, this is not a time for sorting through evidence and hearing from witnesses to determine guilt or innocence beyond a reasonable doubt. Once someone lands in Pilate's headquarters, the verdict is a done deal. It is simply a matter of doling out punishment. That said, Pilate does seem to want to understand why the Jewish leaders have brought Jesus to him and what he has done to deserve a death sentence. Maybe Pilate is nervous about stirring up the same crowds that waved palm branches days before when Jesus rode into town on a donkey, or maybe he just cannot imagine that a backwoods preacher with no credentials and no clout could pose a threat in any real way. He certainly seems baffled by the Jewish authorities' insistence on having Jesus executed like a common criminal.

He begins by asking Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate wants to see if he can fit Jesus and the conflict he's stirred up into a category Pilate can understand. After all, Pilate's

¹ Background information offered in this podcast: http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=492

world is defined by a particular kind of power—military, financial, political, and judicial power. These are the categories he understands, so he is puzzled by Jesus. Jesus doesn't help him out; he doesn't answer Pilate's question. Jesus does not play the game. He has already distanced himself from the role of king, at least on the world's terms. Immediately following the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6 of John's gospel, the people want to make Jesus king. He disappears before they can succeed. Jesus does not conform to the world's categories, nor does his kingdom. He tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world."² Or "My kingdom does not belong to this world," as another contemporary translation reads.³ Other, earlier translations read, "My kingdom is not *of* this world," which led some to think Jesus had no concern for the things of this world, the world in which we live. Some parts of the church came to believe that Jesus' kingdom was strictly a heavenly one and that the world in which we live was of little value. As we have walked together through John's gospel, you and I have discovered that such claims do not fit with the Jesus we meet here. This Jesus has shared water with a Samaritan woman, brought sight to a blind man, and raised Lazarus from the dead. He does not tell these people to just hang on for the sweet by and by. With courage and compassion, he plays by a different set of rules, he heals them and welcomes them in the midst of this world. It is true that the ways of the world quite often run counter to the gospel Jesus offers, but in chapter three the gospel writer reminds us that God gives this one, this only son, this Jesus out of love *for* the world. It is God's deepest desire to redeem the world and all who live in it, to save the

² John 18: 36, New Revised Standard Version

³ John 18: 36, NRSVue

world from its stubbornly destructive ways, and to bring life, abundant eternal life here and now. That is the truth we meet in Jesus. This is the truth Pilate cannot see.

The world in which we live is dramatically different from the world Pilate knew and the world John's community encountered. And yet, the last question Pilate asks, "What is truth?" could not be more relevant. Truth seems hard to pin down in our open-source, AI-fueled era. Truth can be hard to come by at times, and so we need help seeing truth, it seems. It has been a while since I read the Hunger Games books, but their message about truth and power may resonate more now than they did when they were all the rage. In *Mockingjay*, the third and final book, the question of what is real and what is true comes to the forefront. As you may know, the heroine of the books is Katniss Everdeen, a young woman who volunteers to take her sister's place in the annual Hunger Games competition. From the outset, Katniss shows that she is unwilling to play by the rules established by the Capitol and enforced by the villainous and heartless President Snow. She does not buy her world's definition of goodness or truth. She questions and defies her oppressor at every turn and winds up as an inspiration to an entire nation. Once the people's rebellion is underway, one of Katniss's closest friends, Peeta is captured by the Capitol's forces. Even after he is rescued, their sinister treatment leaves him angry, dangerous, and uncertain about what is real and what is not, what is true and what is not. In an effort to help him heal, several of his friends develop a game that they call "Real or Not Real." In this game Peeta "mentions something he thinks happened, and they tell him if it's true or imagined."⁴ It's more than a game of course; it's a lifesaving exercise in

⁴ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay*, p. 272.

redemption carried out by a courageous and compassionate community. Through this game, Peeta comes to trust and rely on his friends as they help him understand the truth of the world around him. Their love and loyalty help him heal and confront the whole truth—both the all-too-real nightmares he has faced, as well as the real and stubborn devotion of his rag-tag rebel community. The game goes something like this:

Most of the people in [my] District were killed in the fire [Peeta states].

Real [a friend responds]. Less than nine hundred of you made it [out] alive.

The fire was my fault [Peeta says].

Not real. President Snow destroyed [that district] to send a message to the rebels.⁵

Real. Not real. Real. Not real. Piece by piece. Truth by truth, the community helps Peeta recover by enabling him to see and understand what is true. Later Katniss will come to depend on the same truth-telling from Peeta and the others. It is this truth-telling that will point Katniss toward what is real, toward the ones who can be trusted. It is this truth-telling that will save her from the destructive and false ways of the power-hungry, violent world of the Capitol.

Pilate does not know what or whom to believe. He does not trust the religious authorities; he tells them that he “find[s] no case against” Jesus. And yet, he lacks the vision or imagination to see the truth before him. Reluctant to resist the religious and political forces on his doorstep, Pilate will end up sticking with the world’s ways of violence and power in order to keep Rome’s version of the peace, a peace built on conquest and cruelty, rather than

⁵ Collins, p. 272.

relationship, compassion, righteousness, and love. He will continue to play the game by Rome's rules.

But it's not simply a game, is it? This work of seeing the truth of who God is as revealed in the person of Jesus is an urgent matter of life amid a world too often bent on death and deceit. That is one of the gifts of this community of faith. Here as the gathered community, we help each other see and remember what is true. Together we study and wrestle and pray and wonder and question as we sort through what is real and what is not real, what is true and what is not true. We won't always get it right; we will falter and flounder at times, but when our vision is clear, by the grace of God, we are empowered to speak and live the truth of God's amazing love in a broken and battered world.

Amazingly, God's own truth is standing right in front of Pilate, and yet the ways of his world do not give Pilate the eyes to see it, to see him. Jesus has promised his disciples that they are not on their own, that life is not a survival-of-the-fittest game. They know him, so they know and belong not to the whims of Pilate's world but to the truth, as do we. Even now, Jesus assures them and us, "I am the way, *the truth*, and the life."⁶ Truth is not a category or an abstract precept. Truth is a person, this person, this Jesus and all that he embodies.

For God gave up on the world and left us to fend for ourselves. —**Not** real.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that the world might be saved. —
Real. True. As true as it gets.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ John 14:6, NRSVue, emphasis added