

Text: John 18: 33-40
Title: Truth on Trial
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There is a riveting iconic moment in the movie “A Few Good Men” when the pesky and petulant Tom Cruise cross examines Jack Nicholson.

With disdain dripping from his lips Nicholson snarls, “You want answers?”

Cruise retorts, “I think I am entitled to answers.”

Nicholson taunts, “You want answers?!”

Cruise erupts, “I want the truth!”

Nicholson barks back:

You can't handle the truth!

Son, we live in a world that has walls and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns...

And, with that he launches into blistering speech about how those standing in harm's way for the sake of freedom live by a code and a set of circumstances that the rest of us can't and don't want to understand.

Every time some guy repeats that central line for comedic purposes ~ girls don't tend to sprinkle their conversation with movie quotes.... Every time some guy repeats that line what's lost is the existential angst of Cruise's statement: “I want the truth.”

In a world of lies we want the truth.

When everything is told slant we want the truth.

When everything is spin we want the truth.

When everything is muddled and messy and murky we want the truth.

Truth be told, I don't know what the truth is half the time. I came of age during Watergate ~ I expect politicians to lie. I grew up watching television ~ I've been lied to every day of my life.

But, I still want the truth. When the news is told ~ I want the truth. When a preacher preaches ~ I want the truth. When the man who murdered my father stood before the judge ~ I wanted him to tell the truth. When I ask our kids what they're doing or how they're doing ~ I want to know the truth....

Now, I know that truth telling invites philosophical pondering and that in a post modern world all truth is interpretation. And, I know that when market share determines truth it is not always fair and balanced. And, I know that I've been known to exaggerate or take storytellers license. But, I still want the truth.

Not just truth as beauty, or truth as taste, or truth as personal journey, but truth that gives rest, truth that gives rise to life, truth that bears up under life's burdens. I want the truth.
You?

I don't know if Pilate wanted the truth. Pilate was a middle management magistrate who wanted to do whatever was pragmatic,
 whatever kept the peace,
 whatever stained him the least.

He was a civil servant of the empire, a cog in the machine, trying to juggle the demands of the clerics, pacify the common crowd, and do his duty for Rome. Disdain dripped from his lips as he talked to the ruling religious right. They brought this to him before lunch, but now they kept their distance ~ waiting on the porch, so as not to be soiled.

Jesus, the accused, stood in front of Pilate. He was either a harmless religious dreamer or a dangerous insurrectionist. He was either a revolutionary who threatened the empire or one more subversive crank who riled up the Jews but posed no problem to power. So, Pilate pokes around with a few questions:

*Are you the king of the Jews?
Your own people handed you over to me. What is it you have done?*

The exchange seems to be going along swimmingly until Jesus mentions the truth.

...the reason I was born and came into this world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.

And, with that the whole thing takes an unexpected turn; with that the whole thing goes sour. Pilate was fine with that muddled and befuddled middle where things are fudged for the sake of political expediency and preserving the status quo. There should be a savvy solution that satisfies the social order; there should be a way to spin this so that all parties can hold their positions of power. Pilate would settle for something that worked.

But, the truth?

Pilate didn't know which way to turn.

 Criminals offer alibis.

 Martyrs make proclamations.

 The misguided spin stories.

 The innocent protest mightily.

 The guilty sometimes plead for mercy.

But, the truth?

 That was a category of philosophy.

 That was the realm of theologians and poets.

 That was in the neighborhood of the ethereal, not the real.

So, Pilate sputters out, "What is the truth?" And, he walks away.

I don't know if Pilate wanted the truth.

You?

Each of the four gospels tells the good news with a particular slant. John uses the language of word, light, freedom, and truth as ways to tell the story of Jesus. Like thematic waves those

categories rise and fall throughout the whole Gospel of John. The other gospel writers write from different angles ~ John uses these familiar Greek/Roman philosophical categories to get at the good news of Jesus.

But, there is always a twist.....

Whether you hear Pilate's question, "What is truth?" as cynical sneer, weary resignation, or earnest curiosity is immaterial. John is the only gospel writer to include the question in this cross-examination. And, in doing so, maybe John is trying to draw out the distinction between a Greek construction of reality and an encounter with Jesus.

For the Greek or Roman mind truth resided in a transcendent realm.

On some spiritual plane there are pure realities of which we experience only corrupted expressions. Truth exists outside of our experience; we know tarnished facsimiles. This construction of reality suggested a kind of dualism between the spiritual realm and the physical realm.

We still live with a hang-over of that way of thinking. Whether the notion that all religions are simply different expressions of the same universal truths, or the conviction that there are fundamental, foundational, unchanging, infallible doctrines that demand our assent..... both positions suggest the eternal fixing of truth in a transcendent realm.

But, there stands Jesus.

Truth doesn't reside in some other realm or exist in a separate sphere.

Truth isn't disembodied idea or essence.

Truth isn't proposition or postulation.

Truth isn't a spiritual reality of which we know only a shadow.

Truth is immediate.

Truth is incarnate.

Truth is a person.

The scandal of the gospel is that in response to "What is truth?" there stands Jesus in the shadow of the cross. Albert Smith writes about this way:

God is not, as in some of the Eastern Religions, outside of and beyond our ordinary perceptions, some abstract being of cosmic intelligence who dwells beyond the stars, but is a God who meets us in the midst of the "fragrant muck and misery and marvel of our world."

...Ours is a faith not rooted in abstractions or vague propositions or matters metaphysical, but a faith rooted in history and happenings, in particular places, specific individual events, singular, unique human experiences. John Updike puts it as "generalities belong to the Devil; particulars to the Lord."

Before my recent trip to Israel I wasn't sure if place mattered. We have this text and these traditions transmitted from generation to generation. Their truth resides in the text, in the

practice, and in the sustaining redeeming Spirit. But, I didn't know if the place or the particulars mattered.

When I voiced that question at the orientation before we left for Israel my fellow travelers were quick to put me in my place. They were going to the place. They were going to walk where Jesus walked. They were going to where truth lived and breathed and had being.

When we got there I was unsettled and overwhelmed. Not by some ooey-gooey-close-to-Jesus feeling, but by the particulars, by the place, by the way in which the gospel stories had a regional geographical logic. It made more sense. It seemed more real. It seemed more true ~ historically.

The unshakable unnerving mystery that God broke into creation
in a particular place,
at a particular time,
to a particular people,
and before a particular Pilate ~ all seemed more particular.
Truth broke in as a person.

Dear friends, if there are familiar themes that keep cropping up in my preaching this is one of them: Our faith is not an assent to a catalogue of propositions. It is not belief in a set of ideas, or a system of theology, or even a cherished world view. Our faith is in a person. Truth is a person.

Now, I don't know fully what it means that truth is a person.

I do know that the relationship we experience with that truth can take a lot of different shapes.

I do know that at different ages and stages of our lives that relationship will be different.

I do know that there is journey and change and mystery in that relationship.

I do know that I am done feeling guilty that my relationship with Jesus (truth) doesn't match some culturally constructed standard ~ it is what it is.....

And, I do know that in the end I'm betting my bottom dollar on Jesus and not ideas or ideologies about Jesus. You?

A friend wrestling with leaving church wrote it this way:

I am a Christian because of Jesus. Not the doctrines of Jesus. The atonement stories from Augustine to Abelard to Anselm to Calvin do not light the fire of faith in my belly. Atonement theories manage to douse the fire of faith not ignite it. Jesus didn't say too much about atonement stuff. It seems to me, he talked more about going home. When someone was healed, he was fond of telling them to go home. When the light dawned on a rebel kid, he went home. And that sacrament served up in the middle of the night was about going home too..., home to an intimate place where friends gather.

Jesus is truth.

May he be the home out of which our lives rise,
may he be the home in which we rest,
may he be the home in which we gather,

may he be the truth that bears the burdens of this life....

For, empires will rise and fall,
principalities will come and go,
the powers that be will be the powers that have been,
kings and kingdoms will crash,
theories and theologies will finally falter,
and truths may be relative,
but truth is a person ~ crucified, dead, and resurrected.

No longer truth on trial, but Truth on the throne.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.