

## What Is Truth?

John 18:33-37

<sup>33</sup> Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" <sup>35</sup> 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?" <sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> 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."

I seem to admit more often than not that I missed-named the sermon because I did not understand what the scripture is teaching, and this is another of those times! So just bear with me and we will get to our conversation about "Truth."

Most children at some time in their childhoods get frustrated enough at their families that they decide to run away. This decision often happens in some dramatic fashion. Pronouncements are made. Important items are packed, and some food is gathered for what will no doubt be a long and arduous journey. For many years, the prevailing wisdom offered by specialists recommended that parents and caregivers engage in conversation with the children, acknowledging their frustration and then discussing with them logically where they would go and how they would live, eventually dissuading the children from running away. This advice, while certainly reasonable, has given way lately to an alternative response. Now it is recommended that parents and caregivers simply tell children, "No," explaining that they may not run away because "we belong to one another" and that when persons belong to one another, even when they are frustrated and upset, they stay with one another.

The question of belonging is at the heart of this conversation between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate was trying to determine if Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jewish nation. Jesus responded by asking questions of Pilate and then explaining that the nation, the kingdom to which Jesus belonged, was not a political reality but a spiritual one. Ultimately, Jesus

and his followers belong to a kingdom that is not earthly bound. Ultimately, Jesus and his followers belong to the truth. Gerard S. Sloyan writes that the words "king" and "kingship" touch on a different sphere from that of this world. Jesus gave the words new meanings. Pilate understood "king" and "kingship" in earthly terms. Jesus redefined "king" and "kingship" to belong to what Sloyan refers to as the "sphere of belief in him who came in to the world to testify to the truth." This sphere of belief occurs among all those who both hear and heed Jesus' voice. Proclaiming the truth, being the truth, and even belonging to the truth are what make Jesus a king. His kingdom—his nation—is not defined by earthly terms, but neither is it some otherworldly, imaginary concept. Jesus comes from and belongs to God's kingdom.

The question of belonging continues to be a crucial if troubling one. Just as children test the resilience of their belonging to their families in times of frustration and disagreement, so too do adults. We test our belonging to our families. We test our belonging to our communities of faith. We test our belonging to our nation. These tests appear in a variety of ways. Unlike children, many adults have the ability to leave relationships, and some do—for a few hours to calm nerves, for a few days to ponder the durability of the relationships. Some eventually leave permanently. Communities of faith are no different. Some persons test their belonging by delivering ultimatums. Some persons test their belonging by simply drifting away quietly, wondering if anyone will notice. (I am happy that many of you continue to reach out to those who drift!) Others take time to engage in thoughtful conversation with the community's leadership and then, through measured prayer and discernment, decide whether to stay or to leave.

Even our citizenship is tested. For some communities of faith, the placement of the national flag in the place of worship is a deeply contentious issue. Some see the presence of the flag in the sanctuary as a symbol of idolatry. Others see the symbol of the flag as an obligation, signifying our gratitude to God for the freedom of the expression of religion framed in this country's founding texts.

The underlying assumption in all of these situations is the profound emphasis in American culture on the individual. All of these tests of belonging are focused on the individual's own decision making. But is this what Jesus meant when he said that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice? Is it really up to the individual to decide?

Bruce J. Malina writes that one of the greatest challenges for Americans in reading the Bible is to understand the difference between the U.S. emphasis on the individual and the Mediterranean emphasis on the community. Malina explains that in the world of the New Testament, a person did not think of himself or herself as an individual who acts alone, regardless of what others think and say. Rather, the person is "ever aware of the expectations of others, especially significant others, and strives to match those expectations. This is the group-embedded, group-oriented, collectivistic personality, one who needs another simply to know who he or she is."

In the example of children who are testing their belonging to the family, the best response is to remind them of their place and participation in the family. When Jesus told Pilate that all who listen to Jesus' voice belong to the truth and are part of his kingdom, he was saying, in Mediterranean fashion, that belonging is less about individual decisions and more about collective participation in a community that transcends the self. He even hinted at this for himself when he spoke of being born and coming into the world to testify to the truth. The reign of God is larger than any individual, even Jesus himself.

Surely the kingdom is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present wherever we experience the reign of God through God's invitation, healing, and restoration—but our belonging is not up to each one of us alone. Our belonging is up to God. That is the new reality that Jesus proclaims. That is the new truth to which all of us—the community of those invited, healed, and restored—belong. **Rodger Y. Nishioka**

On this Sunday, the church proclaims Christ the King. The church announces that it bows only to Jesus the Christ. The church declares that it does not give allegiance to any other person, principality, or power claiming to be sovereign.

We notice Jesus' model. As Pilate asked the question designed to catch Jesus in a capital offense, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said to him, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" (v. 34). There, before Pilate, Jesus sought to encounter the real Pilate, the one who in truth was utterly trapped in his desperate effort to stay in control, in his position between Rome and the Jewish leaders, between a rock and a hard place. There Jesus gave himself to be with the true person who was Pilate. There Jesus invited Pilate to be transparent, to utter the truth of his own life.

It is exactly what Jesus did at the beginning of his ministry with the Samaritan woman at the well. And here in the very last encounter Jesus had with a human being before his death, an encounter that led to his death, he made an offer to Pilate. "Everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice," said Jesus to Pilate. Even to Pilate Jesus offered to be the good shepherd, the good shepherding king, who, when his sheep listen to his voice, are led into abundant life (John 10).

This is always Jesus' offer. But to receive it means facing the truth about our lives, the truth Jesus holds up before us. Pilate refused to face that truth. "What is truth?" he declared dismissively.

What about those of us confronted by Jesus today? Jesus still offers the invitation to be authentic about how it is with us, and being authentic, to be led by the shepherding king into abundant life. **Pete Peery**

Last week we got good news about one on our prayer list. Dave, Cammie's friend, spoke with a pastor/evangelist and he confessed his faith in Jesus and was baptized. He has done what each of us is called to do: identify Jesus as truth, listen to his voice, and accept him as king!