

“The Truth About Silence”

John 18:33-38a

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And so today we have arrived at another Christ the King Sunday, with a hard and confusing text about Jesus and Pilate, with an unanswered question hanging in the air. Jesus has been turned over to the Roman governor Pilate amid vague accusations by Temple officials that he was guilty of crimes deserving a death sentence. Pilate is compelled to do something with this Jesus and so an interrogation begins. And what begins with a rather simple question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ends up with the mind-bending question, “What is truth?” and in between, Jesus has taken both Roman and Jewish notions of truth and kingship and turned them sideways.

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus has been speaking about truth — “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” — “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth,” — “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” In the very first chapter of John, we are told that “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Jesus has a lot to say about truth and he winds up saying to Pilate, “For this I was born: to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” And then Pilate asks his question that is the theological equivalent of asking the price of a bauble in an upscale boutique; honey, if you

have to ask, you can't afford it. "What is truth?" Pilate asks, because in his empire, all religions are created equal, even if some are more equal than others, and he wants to know if Jesus' brand of truth claims to trump the empire's. And if it claims to be a higher truth, he will indeed have a problem on his hands.

Pilate is not the only one who doesn't "get it" about truth. Truth is one of the main themes in John, along with light. Those who know Jesus know the truth and stand in the light. Those who do not live in darkness and falsehood. It is as simple as that. Jesus has come to reveal God, to testify to that truth, to bring the light into the world. It is an open and shut case. And Pilate, the temple leaders, and quite a few others in the Gospel of John don't make the grade; they don't recognize Jesus as the Son of God he is and therefore do not see God for who God is. For them, Jesus remained one truth among many in a pluralistic Roman empire that recognized the value of a live and let live religion policy.

Truth, then, is the perfect word to be used here, for the root of the Greek word for "truth" means "non-concealment." Maybe this is why today we use the expression "uncovering the truth," because at its core, truth is that which is seen or indicated, what is expressed or disclosed, a thing as it really is. And so in the Gospel of John, the truth is Jesus' non-concealment of God, his revealing of God. This is not truth in the legal sense or truth in the scientific sense. It is spiritual truth, a truth from before the creation of the world, a truth beyond the mind's ability to comprehend. The truth Jesus is talking about has everything to do with

disclosure, and authenticity, about a divine reality, about revelation, about “I am.” In a sense, truth is the ability to reveal God. It is as though Jesus had said, “I did not come as a King; I came as truth; I did not come to assume power, but to reveal it.”

For those of you who have not been introduced to Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian pastor and author, let me commend him to you. He has a way of coming to terms with some of the more complex and mystifying matters of faith. And concerning truth and Pilate’s question, Buechner has made a keen observation. He notes that Jesus does not respond to Pilate’s question, and it is in the silence of Jesus’ non-response that the answer comes most profoundly. Buechner’s insight is that there is an intimate relationship between truth and silence, for in silence is found the most profound encounter with God, the kind you can’t run from, the kind you cannot hide from. Silence, like truth, is very often uncomfortable. Silence, like truth, makes us face ourselves. It cuts to our quick. It lays us bare and makes us raw. Truth is a conversation stopper. Truth never lies, it doesn’t have to. It has the power to say nothing and just be, dangling in front of us, challenging us to question it so that it can remain silent. Truth almost seems smug and condescending, daring us to confront it so that it can convict us.

Buechner goes on to say that silence by itself is not enough and it takes words to give shape to the silence, to frame it like bricks and mortar do to the “space” of a building. You see, good architecture is not really about the building

itself so much as the space the structure creates. The materials for this building, lying in a heap on a piece of land signify nothing. But arranged just so, they create a space in which we are able to worship our God and recognize better the truth among us. The task of words is to create the silence in which God is revealed. Truth and silence, mediated by words, are the best of friends.

I experienced that friendship a few years ago, on the day before Thanksgiving as a matter of fact, as I sat in a restaurant with the rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh who exploded, one by one, my supposedly well reasoned excuses for not looking for a call to a church outside of Pittsburgh where I had graduated from Seminary. After each question he asked, I stammered through a suddenly unconvincing answer, once spending what seemed like an eternity, but was really only three minutes which actually *is* a long time, trying to formulate for myself and for him an honest answer, when none was to be found. His words created a silence big enough to drive a truck through, and revealed to me something about myself and about God I had decided to ignore. It was like standing naked in front of a mirror. You cannot hide from the truth of your own body or your mortality. And you can't hide from the truth of God. I started looking for churches outside Pittsburgh that weekend.

There is no question that divine truth works in our individual lives, as it did in mine. And I'm sure that each of you has been face to face with the truth, perhaps even in an experience of silence. But it also works on a bigger scale. If we were to

take Buechner's insight about the shaping of silence, and combine it with the metaphor of architecture, we might find that the people of the church can be that which gives shape to silence and then truth; that is, as we live and breathe together in the Spirit, we have the opportunity to help to reveal truth by the shape our actions give it. Let me say that again: we have the opportunity to help to reveal truth by the shape our actions give it. If our words and actions are Christ-like, if they create in the world a profound and holy silence, then we give witness to the church, and we reveal its character, and if we are lucky, we reflect the very nature of God, which is truth.

The truth to which Jesus is witnessing in this episode with Pilate is that the rules of the Kingship game are not only changed but are incomprehensible to those who do not listen to the truth. Jesus and Pilate are clearly not on the same page. The world cannot understand a king who does not act like a king, a king who does not wield the power that kings wield. It is utter nonsense. It is absurdity. And therein lies our task and our calling: to be about the business of shaping the silence which gives witness to this glorious nonsense, this fantastic incomprehensibility that God reveals in Jesus Christ.

My friends, if we really believe that Christ is ruler over all the kings of the earth, we've got a lot of silence to create to make that incomprehensibility known. We need to shape a holy silence that reveals the truth that it is simply unjust that millions of children die of starvation and disease when we have so many resources

at our disposal. We need to create a holy silence that makes it known that thousands of children are forced to work in sweatshop conditions to make the products we trot out to the Mall to buy at Christmas. We need to give form to a holy silence that announces the end of a culture of domestic violence that is the leading cause of injury and death among women in most countries. We need to mold a holy silence in which the least, the lost, and the lonely can hear God calling them to experience the intimate and wonderful truth of Jesus Christ.

These are all daunting tasks to be sure, but how much more daunting can they be than taking an absurd and incomprehensible truth into the heart of the Roman Empire as did the Apostle Paul. How much more difficult can it be than helping to end slavery and then segregation, or creating the United Nations, or standing up to the Nazi's, all things this remarkable thing we call the Christian church has done. May God bless us all as we go about the work of giving shape to a silence that speaks the truth, loudly and clearly and which helps the whole world to understand and experience how wonderful God's reign really is. Amen.