***What is Truth?***

A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scripture reference: John 18:33-37

Here we are at Christ the King Sunday…always the last Sunday before Advent…On Christ the King Sunday, the church invites us to recall the identity of who it is we will actively wait for during Advent. The readings for Christ the King Sunday, though they differ across our three year lectionary cycle, always reinforce the humility of Jesus…they always present us with a “king” who defies all the stereotypes of a king…and today’s readings are no different.

What we see from Jesus this morning is a leader who refuses to have his identity wrapped up in status or power over. He refuses to identify himself as a King, because a “king” in Pilate’s understanding, dominates, very often, with the tools of violence and fear. Instead, the only identity that Jesus will claim here under Pilate’s interrogation is as one committed to uncovering and proclaiming truth.

I don’t understand why the folks who put the lectionary together for Christ the King Sunday stop here, though. Really, they should stop after the very next verse, where Pilate asks “What *is* truth?”

That is the question. And that is the difference between the sort of King that Pilate has in mind, and Christ the King. Rather than dictating what his subjects should say and do, or providing simplistic one-size-fits-all answers, Jesus gets people to ask the right questions. And boy, back in Jesus’ time, and most definitely in ours now, “What *is* truth?” is the right question.

Truth is so tricky. I was reminded of just how tricky truth is while listening to another episode of the podcast Hidden Brain. I know…I quoted Hidden Brain in another sermon not that long ago…But, there is such deep resonance between the subject matter of Hidden Brain—namely, exploring how we come to see, experience, and then engage in the world—and Jesus’ work of uncovering and proclaiming truth. But, I digress…back to the Hidden Brain episode, itself.

It was an episode devoted to “Group Think.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Group think is a term used to describe the power of the groups to which we belong in shaping not only what we think, but how we act. It chronicled Group Think research, which has revealed that our identity as part of a group has the power not only to determine our thoughts, but also our five senses, even how we make sense of our spatial environment!

Did you know that a university athlete’s dirty shirt is rated as substantially more smelly and disgusting if research participants are first told that it comes from an individual from a rival University rather than one from their own? Or that New Yorkers who are Yankees fans asked to mark Boston on a blank map of the U.S. will put it much farther away than non-fan New Yorkers?

Indeed, truth *is* tricky!! Especially when our identity is particularly strongly connected to a group that places itself over and above another group.

The findings of Group Think research may seem lighthearted, and perhaps insignificant, but they aren’t. They show the power of others to shape reality for us. And that power can be a matter of life and death. Jesus knew this, especially in these last days of his earthly life, when he experienced, for himself, just what it is to be at the mercy of those powerful who seek to mold the truth, rather than to allow what is true to mold them.

Truth is sometimes incredibly clear-cut and at other times very messy, with multiple truths in tension simultaneously. But, Jesus promises us that in pausing to seek what is True with a capital “T,” in loosening our group identity so that we can evaluate what *is* reality, we will hear *his* guiding voice.

*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.*

To belong to the truth is scary. It is to give up control. But, Jesus promises that when we figure out how to stop trying to control what is seen as truth, then we will be liberated into the ability to attend to…to be moved by…to take action on behalf of what is actually truth…and it is that action on behalf of truth that will place us squarely inside the healing and wholeness of the Kingdom of God, present already among us, though not fully.

We in this Country find ourselves in a moment where this dialogue between Pilate and Jesus has exceptional resonance. We are in a moment where each one of us, many, many times a day, needs to pause and pose that most important question, “What is true here?” We are deeply polarized. Those on each side of whatever the divide is—and there are many divisions right now…many lines down the sands of our country, our communities, even our own families…are fully engaged in every effort to control what is seen and testified to as truth.

But if we let Jesus converse with us…if we let Jesus speak in our midst, among our supposed certainty, in our possible self-righteousness, especially in our fear of losing out, of not having enough, of not belonging, one of us will end up asking the right question…what is truth?

As I write this sermon, Kyle Rittenhouse has been acquitted of all charges in the murders of three protestors on a city street by semi-automatic rifle in Kenosha, Wisconsin which he perpetrated as part of a heavily armed mob of white men that came to protect *property*, and in so doing, took lives. *What is truth?*

To belong to the truth is to pose this question to ourselves at every turn…constantly re-evaluating, learning and observing, diving into prayer to let whatever new information we have uncovered church in sacred dialogue with Christ. We are not after truth that seeks to preserve power or promulgate fear or reinforce our group identity for the sake of belonging.

We are after sacred truth. Truth that honors first the experiences of those who have been silenced, does not run from messiness or hurt, and relentlessly honors the dignity of all others, even those we have come to see as ruthless adversaries. If we really seek to uncover and see what is truth, we must expect that there is something of God…something redeeming…something of love, however wounded, in every other’s experience of our world.

As we tackle the biggest challenges of our day—a climate emergency, rampant structural racism that continues to limit the humanity of people of color, a political divide that threatens our very democracy, a pandemic that burns on—we must ask again and again and again, What is truth?

And, if we are to be loyal followers of our King, Jesus, we must let our answers shape our actions. To belong to the truth—to Jesus—to the Kingdom of God—is not to dictate what is true, but to be dictated by what is true… As family members. As colleagues. As coaches and mentors. As advocates. As jurors…….As voters and elected officials. As parishioners of this beloved church.

To belong to the truth is to participate in the dream of God…the bringing of wholeness and freedom to all people—to all groups, not just our own. To behold the truth of our surroundings, of those we love, of those we despise, of our own selves, is to see that God is making a way for all of us and on that way, we all find what we need.

AMEN.

1. Hidden Brain Podcast, “Group Think,” aired September 20, 2021, [www.hiddenbrain.org](http://www.hiddenbrain.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)