

(4th Sunday in Lent)

John 18:28-40

“What is Truth: A Tale of Two Kingdoms”

Raise your right hand and repeat after me - “I swear that the testimony that I shall give, shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

But what is the truth we swear to tell?

Oscar Wilde said: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

That seems true enough.

In the movie, **A Few Good Men**, there is a very famous military court room scene between Naval Lawyer, Lt. Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) and Col. Nathan Jesse (Jack Nicholson).

In what has become an often quoted exchange between these two characters, Col. Jessup, who is on the witness stand, says to Lt. Kaffee: “You want answers?” Lt. Kaffee, in very strong, demanding voice, with his fist clinched, replies: “I want the truth!” Col. Jessup, with that classic Jack Nicholson facial expression, looks him in the eye and with a condescending tone, says: “You can’t handle the truth!”

While slightly different, I relate to this exchange when I find myself in the Associate Principal’s office, trying to sort out the “truth” around a behavioral incident with students.

What is “truth” anyhow? Is it just a matter of one person’s perspective against another? Is the truth subjective or objective? Sure “Facts” are important when it comes to the “Truth,” but are “Facts” really the “Truth”? Or is the “Truth” larger than just the “Facts”?

Jack Webb’s character, Sargent Joe Friday, of *Dragnet* fame, uttered the famous phrase: “Just the facts, ma’am.” Except, the truth is, he never said those exact words. In researching it, he actually said: “Give us the facts, ma’am.”

Getting the facts straight in order to understand what is the actual truth is very important, and very challenging, as we can see, hear, and understand something from very different perspectives. Take for instance, Jesus.

We often use the phrase “The Gospel Truth”. The truth is we have the four Gospels to bear witness to the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. But there are many others like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene who also were written about Jesus, though they did not make the Biblical cut, if you will. And then there is the source called “Q” which scholars widely accept Matthew, Mark and Luke used in common to write their own versions of the Gospel “Truth” about Jesus.

What is the “truth” about Jesus, really? Can we handle it if we actually knew?

Like the exchange in “A Few Good Men” there is another famous courtroom scene. While it may not have had the flair of Hollywood actors (I will let you figure out which of the readers this morning was Tom Cruise and which was Jack Nicholson), it nevertheless has an exchange of words between two powerful men - Pontius Pilate and Jesus.

As we know, under the cover of darkness, Jesus was arrested by armed guards. In response to a violent act by the disciple, Peter, Jesus tells him to put his sword away. Jesus’ power comes not by any weapon. It comes from God’s healing acts of love. Jesus may be bound like a criminal, but it is the power of God’s love that makes him truly free.

Pontius Pilate's power comes from the authority of his position as Governor of the Region given to him by the Emperor of Rome. He is bound by his duty to the Emperor of Rome.

Two men, serving two kingdoms, who holds the true power in this moment? Jesus or Pilate?

In his position of power, Pilate is judge and jury. In his position, he has the power to condemn or free Jesus. Pilate is a ruthless ruler. Crucifixion is common. The truth of the matter is he could care less about one more Jewish radical rebel and there was always one more to deal with. He has come to Jerusalem to keep law and order over the people during the Jewish Passover. And now he has to deal with this nuisance.

The Temple leadership has brought before him, one Jesus of Nazareth, an alleged rebel leader, who they say is a threat to Rome (and to their own authority).

Fearing an uprising by the followers of Jesus, they have bound him as a common criminal, brought him to Pilate, claiming they have no authority to execute anyone.

"Are you a king of the Jews?" Pilate wants answers, but can he handle the truth about Jesus, who speaks of the Kingdom from above that he serves. He is not subject to Rome or Pilate.

"So you are a king, then!" Pilate says.

In response, Jesus offers these words: "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

To which Pilate famously responds: "What is truth?"

Just prior to this encounter with Pilate, in John 14:6, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

Fredrick Buechner adds: Jesus "didn't say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn't say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could "come to the Father." He said that it was only by him by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way. Thus it is possible to be on Christ's way and with his mark upon you without ever having heard of Christ, and for that reason to be on your way to God though maybe you don't even believe in God."

Is that the "Truth"?

Meda Stemper, who I referenced last Sunday, is a Presbyterian minister and author of "Performing Love: Entering the Future Through the Ending of John".

She notes "the word truth, which occurs once in Matthew and three times each in Mark and Luke, appears 25 times in John... The two words for true, which appear once in each of the other Gospels, appear 23 times in John."

Echoing Buechner, Stemper says: "People doing the truth come to the light, and everyone who belongs to the truth recognizes the shepherd and listens to his voice."

As followers of Jesus, we know the "truth" to be the incarnation of God's in and through the life, teachings and love of Jesus.

We believe the "Truth" of his life and witness is "Love". It is "Compassion" It is "Grace and Mercy and Peace". It is "Forgiveness". The "Truth" which we testify to is not ruled by any government or ruler on earth.

The "Truth" of Jesus is not just for you or for me, it is for everyone who lives out the love of God witness to in and through Jesus life, suffering love for the "vulnerable", the "outsider", the "outcast", the "stranger", the "foreigner" and those we see as our "enemy".

The "Truth" Jesus testified to in his life and teachings still is "uncomfortable to many".

Meda Stemper says: "It calls the one being freed to a new perspective and new life -- abundant but also transformed."

"What is truth?" Pilate asks.

We too are confronted with a choice about the truth of "what and whom we will set free in the world and in our hearts. Do we choose the transforming, freeing love of a man on a cross and testify to his presence impossibly alive in the world through us and within us? Or is this kind of truth so deeply countercultural that we would rather have something un-mysterious, which lets us feel good without being disoriented, comfortable without being dangerously free?" (Meda Stemper)

So what and whom do you accept and witness to as the truth in your life? The truth of as embodied in and through the life and love of Jesus or the truth as represented by Pontius Pilate?