

*Rev. Jennifer A. Gleichauf  
Covenant Presbyterian Church  
John 18.33-38  
Sermon  
November 21, 2021*

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Often when pastors and scholars in the US talk about Christ the King Sunday they talk about how we, in the United States, don't know about kings and aren't sure what to think of calling Jesus a king. And Pilate sure wasn't sure about it either. Pilate was a brutal, violent Roman leader who knew a lot about Kings. Kings, especially kings of kingdoms or empires, were powerful men, often brutal, with large armies who followed them. Kings had wealth and power and followers who had some wealth and power too.

So when Pilate heard that some people called Jesus a king, his curiosity must have been peaked. And then when Jesus showed up and was nothing more than a poor peasant, Pilate surely thought there must have been a mistake. This was no king. This Jesus - a poor Jewish man with poor, bedraggled followers. So when Pilate asked him "Are you the king of the Jews?" I hear a lot of sarcasm and derision in his tone. Pilate was sure the answer was no, no, Jesus was not a King. Whoever had told him that was mistaken. The only alternative was that the Jews had chosen a very, very sorry excuse for a king.

While Jesus dodged Pilate's question about being a king, he did say his kingdom is from a different place. And it might be helpful for us to translate kingdom as the word empire in this instance, because Jesus was definitely, boldly comparing his kingdom to the Roman empire. In other words, Jesus says his empire is nothing like the Roman empire. The Roman empire measured its success by its incredible wealth and that they had the largest and most powerful military on the planet. And while we may not know much

about kings in the United States, we surely do know something about being this kind of empire.

So, Jesus said, his kingdom, his empire, is different from the Roman empire because he is there to testify to the truth. And Pilate asked his famous question – “what is truth?” In my ears, this question continues to be just dripping with sarcasm and derision. Pilate, like so many people in power throughout history, had a cynical view of truth. “What is truth?” Truth is what Pilate made it. To someone powerful like Pilate, truth is malleable – it bends to fit one’s agenda. And when Jesus associates his kingdom first and foremost with truth, Pilate likely doesn’t think much of it, because for him, truth is far less important than power, wealth, status and doing whatever it takes to hold onto those things.

This should sound familiar to us. This kind of truth – the kind of truth that bends to agendas and serves to keep certain people and institutions in power – we often call “spin” or one of my favorite terms of the last decade coined by Stephen Colbert – “truthiness.” **“Truthiness** can range from ignorant assertions of falsehoods to deliberate duplicity or propaganda intended to sway opinions.”

And our lives are full of it. We know politicians tell stories and give us numbers that show us whatever makes them look good. We know corporations do advertising campaigns to get us to look at the good things they are doing in hopes we’ll ignore the bad. For instance, you may have seen some ads recently by big corporations emphasizing all the good things they do for their employees. But those ads stand in stark contrast to growing complaints from their employees about everything from pay to benefits to how they are treated. We know advertisers are always telling us a version of the truth to make their products look the best. This is all “spin” or “truthiness” –

there is an element of truth, but it's not the whole picture and it can fall to pieces quickly when it is questioned much.

Throughout human history, empires, kingdoms, have used this truthiness, this truth-adjacent rhetoric to maintain control of their people, often primarily through fear. When people believe there is no other way; when people believe their leaders are acting in their best interest, even with direct evidence to the contrary; when people hear what they want to hear, the powerful stay powerful and the poor and oppressed stay that way too.

A good way to recognize "truthiness" is that often it involves a lot of yelling, a lot of putting other people down, a lot of saying its way is the only way, the only truth. Truthiness doesn't want you to poke around its arguments or take a closer look at its facts. Truthiness doesn't want to hear about your or anyone else's experience if it doesn't fit. Truthiness wants to scare you or startle you or peer pressure you into believing in it. Truthiness is very good at whipping up a crowd and good at assuring people they are on the "right" side. And when Jesus said he was here to testify to the truth, this is surely not the truth he means.

As cynicism and distrust of leaders and institutions have become more prevalent in the face of this kind of spin, many have turned to a different definition of truth – truth as something for which they can show proof. Evidence. The science. Cold, hard facts.

And certainly Jesus did testify in some ways to a truth like this. It wasn't hard to point out facts like people were starving and there was a great deal of suffering under the oppression of the Roman empire. He had plenty of evidence with all the empty bellies and the crushing taxes and the regular crucifixions.

But this isn't the fullness of the kind of truth Jesus meant either. Facts are well and good, but we know there have been plenty of facts that have turned out not to be as certain as we thought they were. The earth isn't flat and the sun doesn't go around it. Blood letting isn't a good medical practice. And plenty of others.

So, what truth is there besides "truthiness" serving an agenda or cold, hard facts? Well, what about the truth that you love your child or friend and they love you? Or what about the truth you know when you experience genuine moments of kindness or compassion. What about the truth of knowing what it feels like to forgive or be forgiven? What about the moments you have felt God's presence but have no words to describe it?

There are many things we understand as truth, even when they are not quantifiable through a science experiments or statistics and they serve no particular agenda. And these are the kind of truths Jesus came to testify about. Truths like: life is a miraculous gift, love is greater than hate, creation is brimming with imagination, creativity, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, joy; we are connected to each other in mysterious ways; there is something greater than ourselves. These truths we can't quantify, but we know deeply. And perhaps this truth is something better known as faith – God's truth in our bones and souls.

These truths are not interested in manipulation or power. These truths are the opposite of yelling, angry, whipping up the crowds truthiness. And they are bigger than a list of equations or facts. These truths, preacher John Buchanan says, have a "posture (of) modesty, silence, reverence, not propounding, shouting, condemning, excommunicating." And while, so often, truth gets associated with being very black or

white, real truth is capable of withstanding some grey, some questions, some doubt, some “I’m sure of this part, but a little less sure on the rest.” This kind of truth listens more than it talks, spends more time discerning, than arguing; more time trying to understand, than in a frantic defense.

For a long time, the people of Jesus’ time had been subjected to the Roman empire and its version of the truth. The Roman’s truth was that some people were better than others. And that obscene taxation to build greater palaces for the King was more important than people having food to eat. The Roman’s truth was that their king was a God and as such he could decide whose lives mattered and the King’s truth was that most of them didn’t. And then there were the truths of many of the religious leaders whose truth demanded more and more sacrifices from the people. Whose truth insisted that only they could go into the sacred space to talk to God. Whose truth cared much more about following the letter of every law than having compassion for those who were suffering. These were the truths Jesus’ followers had been told all their lives.

And then they met Jesus. And Jesus’ truth was that God was not some distant figure only accessible through the priests, but available for direct relationship with all people. And they recognized that truth. And Jesus’ truth was that God cared about filling empty bellies and seeing people made whole and welcoming everyone. And they recognized that truth. And Jesus’ truth was that God wasn’t asking for endless animal sacrifices, but wanted a real relationship with people who could confess to God themselves and receive forgiveness. And they recognized that truth. And Jesus proclaimed that all people were beloved children of God, who all were of great worth to God. And they recognized that truth.

All these people met Jesus. They watched Jesus heal; heard Jesus preach; saw Jesus speak up on their behalf to the religious leaders and the Romans; experienced Jesus caring for everyone from the tax collectors and the sinners and the outcasts and the poor, to the rich man who came for advice and Nicodemus who came in secret. And in Jesus they recognized the truest truth they had ever seen. They saw a different kind of kingdom, empire. They saw a different kind of King. They met a different kind of God.

And this is the Jesus we are invited to recognize too. Surrounded by as much spin and truthiness as there has ever existed on planet Earth; inundated with the agendas of so many; overwhelmed by ever changing understandings of science and facts; we are invited to find rest and strength; courage and encouragement; peace and challenge in the truth of Jesus. We are invited to find our worth in God's love. We are invited to see each other with that same love. We are invited to seek a different kind of kingdom, a new empire.

So as we give thanks for all our blessings this Thursday and prepare for the beginning of Advent, Christ the King is here to show us a different kingdom, a new empire, built on the truth we recognize with our deepest selves, our innermost souls - a truth rooted in love and joy, hope and peace, justice and gratitude, connection and relationship. May we recognize it. Amen.