



---

## The Truth that Sets us Free

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*

*November 21, 2021 , John 18:33-37*

In the name of the triune God who calls each one of us Beloved.

In today's gospel reading we have one of the most famous dramas in history. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect of Judea, has Jesus on trial for supposedly claiming to be a king, which would not be tolerated by the Roman Empire. But when Pontius Pilate asks him if he is a king, Jesus won't answer the question. The closest he gets to an answer is to say that his kingdom is not from this world otherwise his followers would be fighting to protect him. The reason this story comes up today is that today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year before Advent begins next week. And this last Sunday of the liturgical year is called Christ the King Sunday, which is kind of ironic given that Jesus steadfastly refuses to call himself a king.

Instead, Jesus insists that his purpose, his reason for being, is to testify to the truth. The million dollar question, of course, is—*what* truth? What truth did Jesus come to testify about, and does that truth have any helpful relevance to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And furthermore, as Pilate asks, what is truth at all?

I'd say truth is a very pertinent subject in today's culture. No matter what side of the political spectrum you're on, we've all been confounded and deeply distressed that our nation is now not just disputing policy and

opinion, such as the best way to structure government or the police, but about the facts on the ground, like who won the 2020 presidential election and whether or not COVID-19 is real.

So there is that kind of truth, about basic reality and facts which are so incredibly important. And there are other kinds of truth that are important. One of these is about admitting the whole truth about our past in order to pave the way for healing in the present. The national Episcopal Church, in its commitment to repair the harms we have committed around systemic racism, has said that the very first step in creating Beloved Community is telling the truth. Such as the truth about how our Episcopal Church often defended and promoted slavery, and mostly stayed silent through the decades of segregation, lynching, Jim Crow, and modern expressions of systemic racism. The truth is that we sit on Dakota land that was unjustly taken through treaties that were not honored, which caused great cruelty and harm toward the Lakota and Ojibwe people of this land. The truth is that in the same year our church St. John's was being formed here in Linden Hills, our neighborhood rose up to drive out a black pastor William Malone, who had bought a home a few blocks away from here, then systemically shut out the remaining black families near us. The truth is that restrictive covenants were widely used in Minneapolis, including Linden Hills, and as a result this community was rated an "A" community, contributing to our high property values. These very forces also created North Minneapolis and the concentrated poverty that exists there. Telling the whole truth about our origins can pave the way for healing, for learning to repair the breach caused by some of our ancestors, which benefitted those of us who are white, and our church body as a whole. After we tell the truth about the

past, we can dare to dream about the future. This was the basis of the Truth and Reconciliation efforts in South Africa, to create a restorative, non-punitive justice for the nation.

While we need the truth of the facts and of our history in order to move forward and heal, there is another kind of truth that I believe with all my heart is even more important. This is the kind of truth that Jesus came to the world to share. This truth is inherently good news, positive and joyful and deeply, profoundly real. What is it?

There are clues about what this good news is in John's gospel. In it Jesus says "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly." So the will of God seems to be about overflowing life for all of us. The first chapter of John says that Jesus came in order to make God known. And that's the crux of it, I believe. The truth is about who God is and who we are. A lot of people insist that Jesus is God, but I think it's kind of the reverse: that God is Christlike. If you want to know anything about God, whom no one has ever seen, look at who and what Jesus is and does. And if you look at the actions of Jesus in John's gospel, you get a picture of love that knows no bounds. The first thing Jesus does is to provide an extravagant amount of excellent wine to people at a wedding. Jesus heals a man born blind, produces a feast of food out of a few loaves and fishes for hungry people, calms the storms of the sea, raises the dead, and empowers his disciples to catch such a huge load of fish that they nearly capsize the boat, after a night of catching nothing. This is what it looks like when the divine and the human fully merge. It looks like an abundance of compassion and courage that changes the reality of our lives and the life of the world.

---

I believe Jesus came to wake us up to what we already know in the deepest parts of our being - that God is overflowing, abundant love, and that every living person and creature is sacred, born not out of original sin but original goodness and blessing. Every living creature is a holy mystery worthy of our utmost curiosity and delight. Look at the face of a baby and you will know this instantly. I think so many people feel their greatest connection to spirituality in nature because there we can see the beauty and sacredness of life for which we are so hungry. The Gospel of John says that in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. This life is the affirmation that God created us in goodness for love.

---

So the deepest truth is that God is love, and everyone is inherently sacred. Everyone in this room probably agrees with this intellectually. But obviously, we don't walk around experiencing this all the time. That is because this truth is not an abstract idea but a reality that can only be touched personally and relationally. We encounter so many obstacles to loving - within ourselves, between ourselves and in the systems that we create. If we truly knew and experienced the sacredness of all life in every moment of every day of our lives, we would naturally walk gently on the earth, with compassion and awareness about the impact of our choices on all other beings. Racism and the genocide of BIPOC people would not exist. The wealthiest of us would not hold so much more than the most impoverished. The earth would not be teetering on the edge of climate disaster. Jesus existed to simply wake us up to what we already know in the deepest part of who we are, and then empower us to live accordingly.

---

Pastor Kelly Chatman who preached here a few weeks ago has convened a monthly zoom group called “Come Together for Racial Justice”. Anyone is invited and welcome. BIPOC leaders convene it and speak, and then we break into small groups to share and cultivate relationships with each other. I attended this gathering a few days ago and was in a small group with a young man I’ll call Darius. Darius said that he had had a traumatizing experience with a police officer the week before. He said that he is always very careful and polite around the police, trying to do exactly what is expected, but he said that in his experience, and I quote, “in any situation, no matter how I act, the police will see me first, not as a witness or a victim, but as a suspect.” What if our country could see young black men as a sacred gift and not inherently a threat? What if we could build not the belief but the experience of the earth as a living ecosystem with inherent dignity and worth?

If we were slowly to learn not just to know but to experience this deepest truth that all life is really sacred, that would upend the domination system that pervades so much of our culture and world. Rome was rightly afraid of Christ, who was no King, but whose reality could destroy empires and everything that harms any child of God. That would heal racism and the earth and our relationships and every other impulse to violence and selfishness.

In the zoom meeting this past week with Pastor Kelly Chatman and Darius, we were all asked what we would be willing to do to liberate our nation from racism. Darius said that he was going to try to see the police positively. Given his trauma with the police just a week before, and what we’ve seen happen on the news over and over again, this was as Christlike a statement as I’ve heard in a long time. It gave me hope for

the future. It made me realize that the Spirit of God is alive and is always working for life and healing. If Darius can seek to do this, surely we can too.

So what can help us stay awake and practice ever more deeply the truth of the sacredness of all living creatures, which is the foundation of loving God, loving our neighbors?

My friends, that is why we are here at St. John's. This is the purpose of Christ and this church. To have a small group of imperfect people seeking to discover and touch and live this reality, to let it disrupt our lives, seeking to dare to believe that it is true. Just like the natural rhythms of the seasons, and the tides, and the moon, we gather here every week to encounter the living God, to wake up, to discover the truth together, to be nourished, be broken open and healed, and then be equipped by God's Spirit to go back out in the world and see it as Jesus does, and to act accordingly.

So let this be our intention today. As imperfect as we all are, let us open ourselves to the overwhelming love of God. I know I need this. Let us open to our own inherent and deepest goodness. Let us rediscover how very sacred each other creature is by definition, no matter what they have done. And then let's learn together how that impacts our thinking, speaking, acting and voting. How it impacts what we say yes to and no to. Let us not just know but experience the whole truth of God in Christ, for the truth will set us free. Amen.