

Why Christianity? Pt. 2: The True

John 18:28-40

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

February 4, 2024/Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

I want to begin by thanking Tim Wiebe-Neufeld and Zachary Wirzba for preaching these last two Sundays while I was away. I have not had time to listen to either one of these sermons yet, but I have heard good things!

Before I left for my holiday, I had introduced a three-part “Why Christianity?” sermon series. Each sermon is anchored around one of what philosophers call the three “transcendentals.” The Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Three Sundays ago, I started with “The Good.” I tried to show how Christianity has borne Jesus’ vision of goodness into the world and transformed it (and how the Western world is still kind of coasting on Christian moral fumes in many of our assumptions and institutions).

Today, we’re on to second of the three: “The True.” We’ll wrap up next week with “The Beautiful.”

Every Sunday morning before worship, I have a short prayer with those involved in the service. I almost always include some version or other of this prayer: “I pray that we would speak truly of you today.”

It is a simple prayer, and it is one borne out of two very basic convictions:

The first is that at our best we want what we believe to correspond to what is real.

We don’t want to believe or to proclaim things that aren’t true about God, whether in our singing, our praying, our storytelling, or our preaching.

The second is that we humans don't tell the truth naturally or easily. Even when we want to. We are prone to errors, to projecting on to God our own desires, to believing and proclaiming what is convenient or popular or any other number of things.

We see through a glass dimly, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13. This side of eternity, we only know in part, never in full.

Ok, so we want our beliefs and our behaviours to correspond to what is objectively real and true about God, about the world and about ourselves. And we find our attempts to do so are frustrated by our limitations, our self-interest, our sin.

And we do so in a world where there are a cacophony of voices trying to convince us of truth.

We live in a very noisy world. So many words flying around, so many different opinions, so much disagreement, so many ideas, so much sloganeering, so many sales pitches, all masquerading as, in some sense, "the truth."

The truth about what I need, what I *ought* to need, what I should support or donate to, whom I should correct or rebuke, what I should watch or buy or sell, what I should invest in, what I should listen to or read, etc.

There are so many "truths" jostling for position in our hearts and minds.

I got a perfect snapshot of this on our recent holiday. Naomi and I went to Germany to see some dear friends that we have known for nearly three decades.

A few days after we arrived, our friends invited/insisted that we join them at a prayer meeting. They are leaders of a church plant that has recently begun.

Our friends have always been a bit more comfortable in the more charismatic and Pentecostal wings of the Christian world and this meeting was quite some distance outside what Naomi and I are accustomed to.

At any rate, at one point in the meeting, there was this moment. There was a good deal of quite fervent prayer. One of the pastors was trying to provide English translations to Naomi and I (but it was hard to hear and the pray-ers didn't take many breaks).

And outside the window, while this quite fervent and multilingual prayer was going on, there was the honking of tractors. Yes, tractors.

You may have heard something about the farmers' protests taking place all over Europe? They're protesting various tariffs, the elimination of diesel fuel subsidies, various environmental policies that are making their jobs harder, and other things.

Apparently, there had been a protest happening weekly in the city square (which is where our friends' little church rented a space).

So, there was prayer competing with tractor horns.

There was also the loud clanging of bells from the stately Catholic Church across the courtyard.

Like most European cities, the city square is where the church is, where people gather. And the bells which used to tell time and summon people to worship continue to ring, even though many of the churches and cathedrals sit empty (more on this next week).

So, there were charismatic Pentecostal prayers and tractor horns and the clanging of church bells.

And there was also a small protest of more left-leaning activists who were protesting either the farmers or the government or one of the opposition parties. These protests were characterized more by rainbow flags and environmental slogans.

That's the audio portion of the scene. What about the visual?

On the way into the prayer meeting, I had surveyed the scene in the city square. There were typical secular Germans, Arab women wearing hijabs, farmers, left-wing activists, young people broadcasting their lives on their phones to someone somewhere else, a few Catholics (I assumed) coming out of the church, and a handful of charismatics.

There were differences of religion, race, sex, gender, politics, ideology... pretty much everything you could imagine, all in one square of one city about the size of Lethbridge.

It was, for me, a perfect visual and auditory snapshot of our cultural moment.

A whole bunch of voices from a whole bunch of different people with a whole bunch of different views, all jostling together and crashing into each other, all claiming to have the truth, all trying to convince everyone around them of it.

This is the world in which we, in 2024, seek to believe and understand and communicate the truth.

Our Scripture reading this morning takes us to another city in another time and place. We are in Jerusalem in the first century.

Jesus has been hauled to the city square by a whole lot of clamouring and angry voices, all claiming to know the truth about God or about the nation, all eager for their vision of the truth to be vindicated.

Jesus has been a lightning rod of controversy. His healing and his miracles and his teaching have provoked awe and wonder. His compassion and mercy have been magnetic. Sinners of all kinds have found in him a friend of the truest kind. ‘

And yet he has flagrantly flouted the religious rules. He has scandalously hung out with all the wrong sorts of people. He has made outlandish claims to be the fulfillment of the law, the embodiment of God’s truth. He has, blasphemously, claimed in word and deed to be God himself.

And now the story is reaching its climax. Jesus has been dragged from the Jewish high priest Caiaphas’s office and hauled before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province of Judea.

The religious leaders want Jesus to be executed for blasphemy, but their law forbids them from doing it themselves. So, they have (rather conveniently and self-interestedly) set aside their differences with Rome for the moment and made their appeal to their oppressors.

Pilate interrogates Jesus for a while, but Jesus responds, as Jesus often does, enigmatically. *Are you a king? Who’s asking? I’m not a Jew, how would I know? My kingdom is not from this world. So you’re a king? Well, you say so.*

I can imagine Pilate getting a little frustrated by this point. And then Jesus says something quite remarkable: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

And then, Pilate’s infamous response. *What is truth?*

You can imagine the scorn dripping from his lips. *Truth? Interesting. And where exactly has this testifying to the truth landed you? Here, in front of me, with your life in my hands.*

For Pilate, truth is power. Truth is the *pax Romana*, the “Roman peace” achieved through violence. Truth is the ability to impose one’s will on another.

Indeed, the famous nihilist and atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche praised Pilate as “the one solitary figure one is obliged to respect in the entire New Testament.”

Now, twenty-first century Canada is not quite as brutal as first-century Rome.

But in our crowded and cacophonous marketplace of competing visions of truth (think back to my image of the German city square), there remain many people who believe that truth depends on having the power to enforce one’s vision of the world upon others.

We just call it democracy.

Every election cycle (and in between), I am dismayed by how many Christians seem to believe that it is in the political sphere that truth is defined and imposed.

This is most obviously true in America, where politics has become a war of attrition, and where the culture wars dominate the imaginations of many people, including Christians.

Liberal Christians line up with the Democrats and conservative Christians line up with the Republicans, but they seem to share the assumption that political power is ultimate.

What is truth? Pilate asked. Then and now, many people seem to think, “truth is defined by the ones who hold power.”

And then, and now, into all our fighting over truth, all our misunderstanding of truth, all of our misuse of the truth, God sends not an overwhelming argument, not a display of brute power, but a person.

Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth.

Jesus Christ, the one who tells the truth about God, about the world, and about human beings.

The truth about God. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the one through, for whom everything was created.

Jesus is God with skin. Jesus is what God has to say to a hurting and broken world. Jesus is the love of God poured out for the healing of the world. Jesus is the judgment of God against all that is false and dehumanizing in the world.

The truth about the world. For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but receive eternal life.

God seeks not to condemn the world but to save it. The world was created good but marred by the choice of its image bearers. The world will be remade and renewed in the world to come.

The truth about us. Genesis 1: And God created human beings and saw that they were very good. And yet we chose and we choose to depart from God and seek to become little gods ourselves. We bear the image of God, but we have defaced and deformed that image.

In nearly every interaction with human beings, Jesus told the truth about who we are. Loved as we are and summoned to the dignity of our calling as human beings.

Dearly loved personal creations of a loving God, called to bear his image in and for the benefit of the world.

And sinners in need of grace. Both tell the truth about who we are.

Ten chapters earlier, in the eighth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said that if his disciples held to his teaching, they would know the truth and that the truth would set them free.

A few chapters later, he declared, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

The Christian conviction has always been that truth, in the deepest sense of the word is a *person* and a *way*. And that the truth is a source of both freedom and life.

Christians have always believed that that truest truth is not a *something* but a *someone* —a someone who stands over all our lies and partial truths, all our misguided attempts and best intentions, even over all of our longing to be truth-tellers, despite ourselves.

A someone who shows us the truth by turning everything we assumed about power and value upside down.

A someone who seeks to train and order our loves.

A someone who can judge and forgive and heal and redeem all our falsity.

A someone who turned his body over to sinful human beings to tell the truth and to bear it on a blood-stained cross.

And, thanks be to God, a someone who told the deepest truth of all three days later in an empty tomb to swallow up all the lies.

Our text this morning ended awkwardly. Marie even said, wouldn't it make more sense to end at verse 38. Why end with Barabbas.

I chose to end with Barabbas because Pilate gave the mob a choice. Do you want me to release Barabbas and all he signifies or Jesus?

Barabbas was a political revolutionary. Some translations say “bandit” or “robber.” Others say, “had taken part in an uprising.” Mark and Luke further refer to Barabbas as one involved in a riot, probably “one of the numerous insurrections against the Roman power.”

Barabbas symbolizes one answer to Pilate's question, “What is truth?” Truth is resistance, truth is political power, truth is rising up to defeat your enemies. Truth is seeking to impose your will upon others.

Jesus symbolizes another. Truth does not impose but invites. Truth is love in its deepest and most self-giving form. Truth heals, redeems, and forgives. Truth is God giving God's very self for the world.

Two thousand years later, we only know Barabbas's name because he was released to placate a mob.

We know Jesus' name because he inspired a movement that has changed the world, and because he gave birth to a church that believed and believes still that he is indeed, the way, the truth and the life.

Why Christianity? Because Christianity has pointed to Jesus as the truth about God, about the world, and about us.

Christianity has not done this perfectly, of course. We must always say this. The church has always been populated by sinners.

Christ, not Christianity is truth in its fullness. To borrow the words of the poet Christian Wiman, "Christ precedes and exceeds Christianity."¹

But Christianity has pointed—however imperfectly, however inadequately, however inconsistently, however self-interestedly—to this life, this One who taught and embodied a vision of God, of the world, and of human beings, and said, "this One tells the truth."

We also have a choice. Whose truth will we embrace and live by?

My prayer is that we would choose Jesus. The way, the truth, and the life.

Amen.



¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/december-web-only/christian-wiman-zero-bone-despair-cancer-christian-faith.html>