

## **Truth on Trial**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
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**Text: John 18:33-38**

I suppose I have read the Scripture text at a hundred funerals. *We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. . . .* Somehow, when the tent is old and weather-beaten or sick or suffering, the thought of trading it in for a strong new home with God is a blessing and a comfort. At the funeral of 35-year-old Luke Russell this week, the words caught in my throat. In no way is it right or fair that he should have to take up residence in his eternal home just yet---- not with his grieving wife and three young children, not with a promising life stretching before him, not with dreams short-circuited and plans interrupted and friends left to weep as they recalled their last conversation with him.

Different, but no less shocking and unacceptable, are the violent deaths of eleven women on Imperial Avenue, not far from Shaker Square. They reveal in horrific detail cracks in the foundation of our community, the odor of despair that so permeated the landscape that it went undetected, the failure of law enforcement, the grim realities of drug addiction, the tragedy of being lost and never finding a safe way to come home.

Today the church year concludes with something called “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday. We’ve come full circle all the way from Advent, which begins again next week. Here on the church’s “new year’s eve,” we look into the future and worship the One who is already there. Christ rules over all. The hymns today are triumphant ones, painting images of a redeemed creation singing praises around the divine throne, of being gathered together, free from anything oppressive or hurtful. It’s only coincidental that Christ the King Sunday falls near the Thanksgiving holiday, but to Whom does greater gratitude belong than the Ruler of the Universe?

Yet we can't avoid the paradox in this equation either. Christ rules, but it's not obvious. Peace is elusive; justice a mere slogan. The earth is struggling to breathe. Our lives are messy, complicated, not always satisfying, but we're pedaling as hard as we can. We can *pretend* to ignore death hunching in the corner. . . .until we can't. What is the basis for our thanksgiving in a world of brokenness—broken promises and broken hearts? What does it mean to you and me to say Christ rules? And what could it mean actually to let Christ rule—in our busy lives and in the human communities of which we are part?

The morning text may seem a curious choice this close to the celebration of Jesus' birth. It takes place at the end of Jesus' life, after everything he has taught and done, after his open-hearted welcome to society's riff-raff, after his challenges to the religious authorities, after he has healed blindness and sickness and long-standing divides, after his profound reshaping of the old commandment to love God and love one another. Now he has been betrayed by one of his disciples, arrested under the cover of night, and turned over for trial to the ruling civil authority because the synagogue was not permitted to impose a death sentence. In this scene, Governor Pilate interrogates Jesus, asking him about his kingdom and about his rule. . . . questions that, when you think about it, are the same ones we're asking today. What is the truth of our lives? Will that truth withstand the challenges of life...and death? Listen for God's Word to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the eighteenth chapter at the thirty-third verse. [JOHN 18:33-38]

What *is* truth? The 20s/30s individuals with whom I had the privilege of discussing this text pointed out that the response to that question is partly determined by the way it is asked. Was Pilate a seeker who asked it with genuine curiosity, or was he a cynic, dismissing it with a sneer. What is *truth*? Good luck with that!

The group that pondered this text at Theology on Tap immediately commented on two things that intrigued them. They noticed that

Jesus didn't directly answer Pilate's questions, but responded with ones of his own. Jesus could have met this threatening situation with nice, neat, memorable quotations. He could have given a formula that we could underline in our Bibles or display on a plaque in our church. He could have defended himself or offered platitudes to placate Pilate. Instead, Jesus becomes the questioner. He asks Pilate to face the truth of his own life, and compare it with the truth he hears from Jesus.

Then, too, the group noticed the implicit irony of this scene. Pilate thinks he's in charge, but he isn't. He thinks he's in control of Jesus' destiny and later even warns, "I have your life in my hands." But he doesn't. The group envisioned the scene as something like hauling Mother Teresa into court for a traffic ticket, it's that absurd. They're not even speaking the same language: Pilate is focused on one kingdom—the Roman empire---and concerned only with the possibility of Jesus as a rival to its ruler. Jesus is speaking of an eternal kingdom—a spiritual empire—that transcends all borders and boundaries. Pilate is trapped by what comedian Stephen Colbert might call "truthiness"—the explanations we tell ourselves and others to maintain control. Jesus offers the truth that will set people free.

Sometimes I wish Jesus had simply laid down the law for Pilate (and for us); just come right out and answered that pesky question about truth. But the more we talked about it, the more we began to understand Jesus' response as an invitation, that truth resides in an ongoing relationship with him; a conversation that can't be captured by a catchphrase, a statement of belief, or an intellectual proposition. *Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.* Friends, if you want to know the truth, get to know Jesus. Look at his example of self-giving love. Listen to his words that widen our vision of what life is and what it's for. Find the path for your life in his.

You know, it's not really Jesus who is on trial here, but truth. What is the foundation upon which we can build a life ruled not by fear but by love, by faith, by hope? And maybe we're on trial here too, as

we think about where our loyalties lie. To Christ the King? Or to other, lesser gods? Who or what holds first place in our lives? The answer to that question for some German Christians in Nazi Germany meant they had to speak up against Hitler and his genocidal regime. They drafted the Barmen Declaration—a portion of which we will say following the sermon this morning—which explicitly affirms that loyalty and allegiance belong to Christ and to no one else. Living that way cost some of those Christians their lives.

Even to Pilate Jesus held out the truth that could set him free. But Pilate wasn't ready to face the truth about his life. He signed the death warrant that took Jesus to his death on a cross. Again, the irony of the inscription Pilate had them affix just above Jesus' head: "The King of the Jews." Coronation on a cross; a crown of thorns. And yet it was through this suffering that death was overcome; the powers beaten back so they could no longer claim final victory. Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again to make his Kingdom as complete on earth as it is in heaven.

In the meantime, friends, let us live as people who know Who rules. What does that mean, exactly?

Well, I think it means standing up courageously to forces of evil and violence in their many guises with the power of unarmed truth and unconditional love. I think it means pursuing justice for all. I think it means learning ways to make peace in our families, community, and world. I think it means joining with brothers and sisters at North Church to feed the hungry and minister to the hurting and witness to God's saving grace. I think it means seeing our lives as connected to others by virtue of our common parentage. I think it means holding out hope, even or especially in situations others deem hopeless. I think it means consciously opening every part of our lives to the one who rules heaven and earth. I invite you to try something. This week, as you get ready for the day, say, "Jesus, I'm listening. What are you saying to me?" That's all. *Jesus, I'm listening. What are you saying to me?* I think as you and I do that, we

will discover a way, a truth, and a life beyond anything we have ever imagined.

A couple of years ago, a *New York Times* reporter interviewed Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem—who some of you have heard preach at the Chautauqua Institute. Located within a community severely challenged by concentrated poverty and scarred by drugs, homelessness, and gang warfare, his congregation reaches out with many healing, helpful ministries. After he described this mission, the reporter asked, “Do you think your church is making any difference?” Dr. Butts replied that he really didn’t know. “Then why do you keep doing it?” the reporter pushed. Pastor Butts responded, “Because we read the Bible, and we know how the story ends.” *[quoted by F. Morgan Roberts in an unpublished sermon “They All Come Home at Last” 10/11/09]*

So we come to the end of another church year, another cycle of listening for God’s Word and that Word made flesh in Jesus. We’ve heard the stories and been touched and tested by Jesus’ teaching. We’ve struggled and thrived, grown weary and been renewed. Now we bring our thanksgiving, our faith and our fear, our questions about truth and significance, our victories and yes, our valiant defeats (six out of the last seven I believe), and place them in arms of the One who rules. We know how the story ends. We know who is on the throne. And that means we can sing at the funerals of our beloved ones, as we did last Wednesday: Let us build the city of God. May our tears be turned into dancing. For the Lord our light and our love has turned the night into day. Amen.