

April 14, 2017 – John 18:33-38 (Good Friday)

Truthiness. The political satirist Stephen Colbert coined this new word in 2006 during the pilot episode of his television show, *The Colbert Report*. He became famous for it and the made-up word was later selected by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as the word of the year. Despite not actually being a word.

Colbert at the time defined it as, “Truth that comes from the gut. Not books.” The American Dialect Society later gave it a more formal definition: “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.”

You may not have ever heard the word before, but truthiness is a familiar concept to us. Especially when it comes to politicians. Rarely can we ever take what a politician says at face value. They're usually trying to manipulate the facts in some way or another. And if they can tell something that we want to be true, often they can get away with it.

The term may have been invented 11 years ago, but it still happens today. And it was happening long before Stephen Colbert ever created a word for it. All the way back into ancient Rome. And before.

So you really can't blame Pilate when he questions Jesus about his identity and finally says, “What is truth?” Pilate is the governor. He's a politician. And when Jesus is dragged in before him, all he sees is another politician. Or, at the very least, someone looking to get their fifteen minutes of fame.

But he engages Jesus anyway. Maybe he just wants to size him up. After all, his first question is, “Are you the king of the Jews?” It's a bigger question than he realizes. But Pilate isn't interested in a theological discussion. He's looking at the question far more literally. Does this man consider himself a political figure with political power? Does he think of himself as king over his followers?

“Who put that idea in your head?” Jesus responds, knowing full well that the Jewish leaders have been trumping up charges against him and manipulating whoever they could to get Him executed. They have their own warped idea of truth too. So Pilate levels with Him. “Look, your leaders handed you over. I don't care who you are. I just need to know what you've done and if you're a threat to me. So spit it out.”

Pilate doesn't want to get into theology with Jesus, but when you're talking to the Son of God, that's pretty much all you're going to get. So Jesus tells him, “You have nothing to worry about. My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, if I were really interested in becoming king, if I really had enough followers to start a revolution, do you think I would let myself be arrested? What political leader starts a revolution by getting himself captured and telling his followers to put down their swords? Seriously.”

But Pilate has picked up on something Jesus said, “You are a king, then?” You think of yourself as a king?

“I am a king. I was born to be a king. I came into this world to be a king. But I'm not your kind of king. I'm a king of truth. And everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” At the very word “truth” Pilate scoffs and says those famous words. “What is truth?”

He's thinking about truth in human terms. Based on human leadership and human power. And human truth, even at its best, will always only be... “truthiness.” A vague distortion of truth. Based, more than anything, on our own sinful desires.

From the very beginning that's been the case. When the serpent came to Eve and said, “You won't die if you eat this fruit. You'll be like God, knowing good and evil.” What he said was a lie. A bold-faced deception.

But it sounded so much like the truth. It was exactly what Adam and Eve wanted to believe. They wanted to believe that they could be their own little gods. They wanted to believe that they could judge their own actions without ever being judged by another. They wanted it to be true.

And so the serpent's lie became truth for them. The facts they wished to be true became more important than the facts they knew to be true. And that's a struggle that humanity has waged every since. We have this idea of what's true in our minds. We have a gut reaction to what we want to be true. And so we make it truth.

Around this country and inside our own hearts, we have convinced ourselves that what is sinful is actually good. That greed is generosity. That lust is love. That pride is humility. That idolatry is faithfulness.

As St Paul tells us in Romans 1, we've exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man. We've exchanged God's Law for our own desires. We've exchanged truth for truthiness. It's no wonder politics today is so full of lies and corruption. It's just a reflection of us.

But I wonder whether Jesus' words have gotten to Pilate a bit already. I know, I know. Pilate's supposed to be the bad guy. He killed our Lord. He's right up there with Hitler and Nixon. And yet, I see a change in Pilate after he talks to Jesus.

John's gospel says that from then on Pilate tried to set Jesus free. Pilate has a lot at stake here. He can't afford to defy this crowd and risk a rebellion. Roman governors who let their people riot don't stay governors for very long. In fact, they don't stay alive for very long. Yet, he fights for Jesus' life.

But more importantly, there's the sign he puts on the cross. It's written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, so that every person who walks by is able to read it, no matter where they come from. And it says, "Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews."

The Jewish leaders hate it. "Are you an idiot? He's not actually our king. He only claimed to be our king." But Pilate won't take it down. And I wonder if that's because he himself is beginning to see the truth in those words.

Jesus of Nazareth. King of the Jews. A king not of this world. A king who doesn't operate by the rules of this world. A king who dies for his people. That's not what human kings do. Human kings send people to die for them. They send armies into battle and then watch from the sidelines. They hide in their fortresses while their people die. They don't become the fortress that hides their people while they suffer abuse and anguish and scorn.

Saying that you're a king who will die for your people is like saying that you're a shepherd who would die for your sheep. Or saying that you're a master who would wash your servant's feet. Or saying that you're a God who would offer Yourself in sacrifice for Your followers. But, of course, Jesus said all these things too.

What I think Pilate realized – what I hope he realized – is that the backwardness of Jesus' words were what gave them validity. In an upside down world, the one standing on his head might just be the one who's not crazy. In a world ruled by truthiness and lies, the one who is the least believable might just be the one telling the truth.

For three hours, the crowds shouted, "Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!" as nails pierced Jesus' hands and feet. For three hours, they told him to save himself, if he could. For three hours they watched in victory as they put to death the way, the truth, and the life for being a liar. They thought they were right. They thought it was true.

But they were the ones who needed to ask themselves: “What is truth?” We are the ones who need to ask ourselves: “What is truth?” Because if you look into the depth of truth. If you dive head first into the truth of God's Word and the truth of His sacraments. If you look Truth in the eyes, you'll be looking into the eyes of your Lord. Who is looking back at you with the Truth of His forgiveness. And the Truth of His grace. And the Truth of his life.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed into the hands of sinners. He was crucified and died because of our sins. But what no one knew that day was that death itself was a lie. A deception wrought by the Father of Lies. And that on the cross of Calvary, in the midst of darkness and earthquakes and shame, the light of Truth had just shined into the darkness of death.

Revealing it for what it is. A lie. A deception. A piece of truthiness taught to a world crushed by guilt. Bound and chained by an adversary who wants us to believe that death must be eternal. But now freed by the good news of the crucified Jesus Christ, who shows us that he can defeat even death itself.

What is Truth? Truth is a humble king. Truth is a loving shepherd. Truth is a servant master. Truth is a self-sacrificing God. Truth hung on a cross. Truth died. And yet Truth lives forevermore. Look at the cross. Know the Truth. And the Truth will set you free. Amen.