

2016_02_10 Ash Wed | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

What Is Truth?

*An Introduction to a Bible Class Series
on the Religious Lives of American Youth*
John 18:28-38

INI

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

John 18:28–38

²⁸ Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. ²⁹ Pilate then went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this Man?”

³⁰ They answered and said to him, “If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.”

³¹ Then Pilate said to them, “You take Him and judge Him according to your law.”

Therefore the Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,” ³² that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

³³ Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”

³⁴ Jesus answered him, “Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?”

³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?”

³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”

³⁷ Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?”

Jesus answered, “You say *rightly* that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

³⁸ Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, “I find no fault in Him at all.

This Word of the Lord is spoken for you.

We pray, Lord sanctify us by your truth, your word is truth. Amen.

It is one of those conversations that leaves you confused, frustrated, and uncertain. You know the kind. The kind that leaves you scratching your head, or maybe hitting your head some too.

He's just finished his third year of college and has come home to visit for the summer. Its been over a year now since he's last come to church with you, and tomorrow is Sunday. So mom and dad are beginning to wonder if he'll come. They sit down to a nice dinner and begin talking about school, friends, what he has learned.

They find out that he's got a girlfriend. They also learn that he's been living with her for the better portion of the second semester. They act shocked even though they are not.

"You shouldn't be living with her. Its wrong." Mom says.

"Why?" he asks.

"Well, it just is. The Bible says it is."

"That's your interpretation. That's what you believe. I just don't see what's wrong with it. We love each other. That's what matters to me."

Dad is silent. The conversation soon turns to religion.

"We'll be leaving for church tomorrow at 8:30," mom says.

"Ok," he replies.

"Should we wake you at a certain time?"

"No, that's ok."

"Do you plan to come to church with us?"

"Why?" he asks.

Dad speaks up in a stern tone, "What do you mean why? We are going to church tomorrow, and that's the end of it."

He replies, "I mean why do I need to go to church?"

"Doesn't church matter to you?" mom asks.

"Why should it matter? I've been studying a lot of different religions in my philosophy class and I guess I really don't get it. There are so many different religions. I don't see the point of following this religion if its just one way of looking at the world. I don't really believe in it and you don't want me to fake it, do you? I know it matters to you, and that's great; it just doesn't work for me."

Mom and dad start wondering where you've gone wrong. This is not how they raised him. They took him to Sunday School each week. They made sure he was

confirmed as a Lutheran. But now all of a sudden, he's making choices for himself and they are not right. He's asking questions they aren't ready to answer.

The son goes on, "I'd just like to explore some different options. I've been reading a lot about Buddhism lately and it seems to make sense to me. I like it. I think I'd like to try it out."

Dad responds, "Try it out?"

"Well," he says, "You see, Jesus works for you, but not for everybody. For some people, Buddha works. That's just the way it is."

Mom chimes in, "How will you know if it is right?"

"I guess its just a matter of whatever feels right for you; that's what you should do.

"But this isn't what we taught you. It just isn't true." Mom says.

So he responds, "What is truth?"

Mom and dad don't know what to say. Dad finds himself frustrated, scratching his head, hitting his head, and wanting to hit his son's head a few times too. But he doesn't know how to answer this question. What is truth? Why does it matter? So he decides to get up abruptly from the table and emphatically tells his son to clear off the table and says, "We're leaving at 8:30."

These conversations are more common for American Christian households than we might think. A Barna research survey done in 2002 shows that 4 out 10 American teens say that they base moral decisions on "what feels right." And when it comes to Christian teens, only 9% believe that moral truth is absolute. A Gallup Poll show how the times have changed and how we've changed right along with it. In 2003 a Gallop poll compared Americans answers to the question: "is it wrong to have premarital sex?" In 1969 only 68% of Americans believed it was wrong. In 1987 that number was down to 46% and in 1991 only 40% still believed it was wrong. By 2001, over ten years ago the results show that now over 60% of Americans now say it is not wrong at all to have premarital sex.

These are the conversations that leave parents befuddled. He is asking questions that should not be asked. He knows its wrong to move in with his girl friend. He knows they always go to church on Sundays. He knows what he learned in Sunday School. But he's just not convinced that he can really trust what he's been taught. He's got a million choices in front of him now with a million voices telling him different stories about life and truth. He has no real idea how to make sense of it all. Its a mess. Its chaotic. So he goes with what he knows most well, his feelings.

Just what is truth anyway, and why does it matter? This is the subject of the series we begin tonight and continue in Bible Class on Sunday: truth, youth, and postmodernism. How does the Church teach the faith to the next generation of Christians so that they believe it and so that they know why it matters.

Its conversations like these that leaves us feeling lost; it leaves us lost in an endless abyss of unanswered questions and a future offers no hope. And that is what we face, as long as we are in this world. As long as look to this world and the voices in this world, we find no answers.

To paraphrase the words of Professor J. P. Meyer in his book *The Kingdom of Christ*, "In the final analysis, we discover that we are dealing with the process inside our own psyche and we cannot establish whether they correspond to things in reality. Even the most basic fundamental conclusions arrived at by observation is thrown into question by the theory of relativity. What is truth in the field of art? What is beauty or ugliness? What is proportion? What is noble? What is moral? If the world has failed to agree in even the small questions, how much more will it be hopelessly lost when it comes to the one great question, the question of God."

Pilate was indeed lost. They brought Jesus to him, and suddenly he finds himself in a conversation about God. The Jews have brought Jesus to Pilate because he has made himself out to be their promised Messiah. They want to see Jesus humiliated. They want the cursed cross. And the conversation begins.

Pilate brings Jesus into the governors hall and asks him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate knows this is what they say of him; they accuse him of claiming to be the rightful heir to the throne in Jerusalem; but he also knows that the leaders have done this out of jealousy.

Jesus responds, "Do you ask this to know for yourself, or did others tell you?" In other words, "Why do you want to know? Is there something about me that is royal? Is there something that suddenly aware of what you are saying, what you are thinking?"

Pilate wants little to do with this question. He is no Jew and is not interested in the weakness of their religion or the weakness of this supposed king. He says to Jesus, "Your own people delivered you to me, what have you done?" In other words, "If you are their king, why would your own people bring you here, bound and led as a criminal? Why would they want you dead?"

Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not of this world. If you are looking to understand why they have asked for their own king to be put to death, then everything will depend on where you are seeking to understand me. You will not find the answer in the endless abyss of a world that offers no answers and a future that has no hope. For my kingdom is not from here. That is why I have no army, no officers, no servants to raise their sword for me. What sort of king are you looking for?"

So Pilate says to Jesus, "You are a king then."

And Jesus answers, "If you must use that word, then I will tell you what it means. I am a king. And my kingdom is this, to bear witness to the truth. I have been born a human and I have come from above for this very reason: to rule in your midst by bearing witness to the truth. It is not the sort kingdom you are familiar with, but it is a kingdom far grander and more powerful, and yet it is hidden from your eyes. Only those who hear my voice will see this. And only those born of the truth will hear my voice. Do you see it? Do you hear it?"

Pilate has been confronted with the most important question, who is Jesus and is he the king? But even as he is convicted by Jesus' very words, Pilate cannot understand them. He is of the world and he wants to rule according to this world. This question of truth and this question of Jesus' kingship is a foolish discussion. It cannot be known. So he breaks off this conversation abruptly, "What is truth?"

But even in Pilate's next words, he has declared it. He goes out to the crowds and declares it, "I find no fault in Him at all." The truth is declared, but not believed. There is no fault in Jesus. That is the truth. And yet he is convicted. The pressure of what this world has to offer, the threats of the crowds, the question of allegiance to Caesar, it mounts and mounts until there is a choice between Christ and the world. He must die.

But that is just where the problem of truth lies. His kingdom is not of this world. The truth is: he has committed no fault. And yet the truth is: he must die. God has chosen it for him. For the truth is: he is the king of the Jews. And the truth is: we are lost in the endless abyss of a world which offers no answers and a future which gives us no hope.

If you've come tonight expecting all the answers, then you may be disappointed. I am not here to offer you all the answers tonight. What I am hoping, is to open up a conversation. To open up a conversation about these sorts of conversations. I am hoping that you will join us in Bible Class to continue the conversation, to explore this

further. And to see that the very first place where this conversation begins is repentance.

To enter into the season of Lent is to enter into a conversation with Jesus that begins with repentance. To discover we don't have all the answers, and what we should do is watch, listen to Jesus, for all who are of the truth will hear his voice. Then we will see indeed that there was no fault in him, and we will see that the fault is ours. Hidden in Jesus was an hidden truth – the truth that our faults, our sins were hidden in him. This is how we witness him bearing witness to the truth; this is how his kingdom comes to us, to our hearts, to our conversations, to our dinner tables.

So as you sit down to dinner and find yourself frustrated with yourself, with your family, with the world – before you storm off from the table abruptly, pause for a moment and listen. Come to Bible Class this Sunday and listen. Enter into this dinner table conversation, but do so with your fellow Christians at your side, with Christ in your midst. Leave the endless abyss of a future that has no hope to visit a world of truth, where Jesus reigns, where his kingdom comes, where in a hidden way, answers are given and truth is known, where through Jesus and his cross we are able to bear witness before Pilate and the world that he is the king of the Jews, that he is the truth. Amen.