TESTIFYING TO THE TRUTH

November 25, 2018

John 18:33-37

Jesus has been captured, arrested, tried before the court of the high priest, and tortured. Now he is standing before the Roman governor and is being queried by Pontus Pilate about whether or not he is the king of the Judeans. Jesus’ life basically is on the line, because Pilate is the one who has the authority to decide whether or not Jesus is going to be executed. And what does Jesus do? He gets into a discussion with Pilate about the relevance of truth. After telling Pilate that his disciples are not going to take up arms to try to rescue him, Jesus tells Pilate, “For this I was born, and for this I came into this world, to testify to the truth.”

Put a little differently, Jesus’ mission throughout his life has involved testifying and giving witness to the truth. Truth in this context probably isn’t how we might define or understand truth today. As far as we can tell, this Gospel of John was written near the end of the first century to a predominantly Jewish audience in order to challenge them and encourage them to accept Jesus as their messiah. Consequently, it is important for us to understand how this concept of truth is understood from a Judaic perspective as opposed to our Graeco-Roman or westernized perspective.

For much of my early life, I was taught that the truth was determined by what we know today as doctrines or dogma. True or false—was Jesus born of a virgin? True or false—is Jesus the Son of God? True or false—was Jesus without sin? True or false—was Jesus both 100% divine and 100% human all at the same time? In this context, truth becomes a matter of intellectual debate that forces us to postulate certain formulas known as creeds that lock us into how we are supposed to understand who God in Christ is for all eternity.

From a Judaic perspective, truth is a word that also can be understood as the will of God—something that is about as open-ended and as fluid as we might ever imagine, especially if we consider the role of God’s Spirit who constantly is speaking to us and informing us about what God may desire of us in this or that situation. For example, in our gospel lesson for today, the Spirit is using Jesus to inform Pilate that the realm that Jesus is introducing to the world will not be a realm in which violence will be used, even to defend one’s own life. Here stands Jesus in front of a representative of one of the most violent powers of his world and telling Pilate that the use of violence is not the truth—that is, is not the will of God. Basically, Jesus is telling Pilate that if he decides to hand Jesus over to the religious leaders to be put to death, Pilate will be going against the will of God—as if Pilate cares.

In a world where we are surrounded by all kinds of accusations about fake news and where lies have become the norm of the day, we always are challenged to be on our guard about figuring out what is true and what is false. However, as we get caught up in this dynamic, we constantly are being drawn into a world of factual reality that distracts us from paying attention to what is the truth in any given situation—meaning what is God’s will when it comes to the right to bear arms, the necessity to possess all of the nuclear weaponry that we do, or the presence of 5,000 soldiers on our southern border.

By virtue of our baptism in the name of Jesus, we are called upon to listen to Jesus’ voice if we want to belong to the truth—that is, if we want to be doing the will of God in our lives. The author of this Gospel of John made this point at the very outset of this gospel when he said that this Word of God that took on human flesh was full of grace and truth. In other words, Jesus basically came into this world to reveal to us the will of God, and to do so with such grace that we might be willing to pay attention for a moment to what Jesus has said and to all that he has done in order to let us know what God desires of us in our lives.

Before we consider the ramifications of this revelation of truth for our daily lives, we might want to consider 3 other references to the truth in the Gospel of John that would help us understand the importance of how the early Church understood this revelation of truth. At one point in his ministry, Jesus informed those who had put their trust in him that if they would take his word to heart, they would know the truth—that is, the divine will of God—and be liberated from all that held them in bondage to sin. Later on, when Jesus told his disciples that he was the way, the truth, and the life, he basically was telling them that he was the revelation of God’s will for their lives. This concept of the truth also came up on the night of the Passover when Jesus informed his disciples that he would give them the Spirit of truth after his death in order to guide all of them into the way of truth.

So, how are we to understand this way of truth when there are so many religious voices in our society claiming to have a market on the truth because they know what the will of God is? Just this past week, I watched and listened to a video depicting an array of evangelists who claim to be prophets and who are declaring that what is happening under the current administration is God’s will and that any opposition to this administration is deemed to be the work of the devil in the spirit of the anti-Christ. Some evangelists even go so far as to say that this President is the second coming of Christ, and that his agenda is God’s agenda in order to rid this country of our heathen ways.

Any claim in this regard must be put to the test in order for us to discern what the truth is. If we believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Christ, then it seems appropriate that we reference and use the testimony and witness of Jesus as the litmus test for what the truth is. In order to limit this process this morning, I am going to restrict our examination to John, the Evangelist, and consider how Jesus is portrayed in this Gospel of John as the source of truth. As you listen to this review, you can make your own application to what is happening in our own society today.

Contrary to the timing of the cleansing of the temple in the other gospels, near the very beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus sets the tone for his ministry by taking on the religious establishment and chasing the animal sellers and money changers out of the temple in Jerusalem because they were charging the people much more than what was a reasonable price and rate of exchange. Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is a good example about how Jesus reached out to a total stranger and foreigner without judgment and engaged in a conversation with her as an equal. When Jesus returned to Jerusalem, he healed a man on the Sabbath day and encountered all kinds of criticism from the religious leaders for his apparent violation of this holy day.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus’ revelation about the will of God is very concise and generic, and can be summarized in four statements. The truth that we are to espouse as disciples of Jesus involves abiding in the love of Jesus, keeping the commandments of Jesus, having love for one another as Jesus has loved us, and continuing in the word of Jesus as we are guided by the Holy Spirit. What if we would test everything that we would ever consider saying or doing according to these 4 expressions of truth? How much different would the world be if everyone who was a follower of Jesus would live by these 4 truths?

“For this I was born, and for this I came into this world,” Jesus said, “to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Our challenge in this day and age—as always—is to be diligent in listening for and to the voice of Jesus’ Spirit—the Spirit of peace that Jesus promised to his disciples once he had departed this world. By virtue of our baptism in Jesus’ name, we have been filled with this Spirit of peace. Every time that we come to this table to eat and drink, we are renewed in this Spirit of peace—a peace that becomes our way of life as we abide in the love of Jesus, keep the commandments of Jesus to love God and neighbor, have love for one another as we have been loved by Jesus, and continue in the word of Jesus as we are daily guided by the Holy Spirit in the way of truth. As we venture into this non-violent realm of Jesus, may the love and peace of God that goes beyond all of our understanding, keep our hearts and our minds ever faithful unto Jesus, our Christ. Amen.