

John 18:33-38a (NRSV)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingship is not from this world. If my kingship were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingship is not from here.” ³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

What Is Truth?

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *John 18:33-38a*

There's the story of the child sitting on his grandfather's knee. She says, "Grampa, can you make a noise like a frog?" "A noise like a frog?" he says, "What do you mean?" "You know, a croaking noise?" "A croaking noise? I guess so, but why do you want me to make a croaking noise like a frog?" "Well, daddy said we can't go to Disney World until you croak."

Want another one. A boy says, "My younger brother asked me what happens after we die. I told him we get buried under a bunch of dirt and worms eat our bodies. I guess I should have told him the truth--that most of us go to hell and burn eternally--but I didn't want to upset him."

Okay, one more. When asked what most people do on a date, 10-year-old Mike replied, "On the first date, they just tell each other lies, and that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date."

Children. Jesus says it is those who are like children who enter the kingdom of God. I suppose what he had in mind was square-shooting. Art Linkletter made a living out of the darndest but utterly honest things that children will say. There's hardly a parent who hasn't been embarrassed by a child's transparent truthfulness. I still remember one day. I must have been about four or five. A door-to-door evangelist came by the house, and he tried to get my mother to buy one of his books. She wanted no part of his books or his brand of religion, but out of politeness she simply said, "No, I'm afraid we just don't have the money today." Not yet schooled in the lies of social occasion, and certainly never having seen my own mother lie before, I took her at her word. I also felt so bad for her impoverished state. To the rescue I came. "That's okay, Ma. I've got the money. I'll pay for it." Now blushing, betrayed by her first-born, my mother had to admit that she simply didn't want the book." I, on the other hand, sat there perplexed by the exchange. Why didn't she just tell the guy she didn't want it rather than pretending she was poor?

Guilelessness. Straight-shooting. Simple honesty. Truth. It's what Jesus liked about children.

In our passage this morning Jesus says that he came into the world to testify to the truth. That would seem a simple enough proposition. Children, it seems, get it. But Pontius Pilate seems not to. When Jesus says that he came to testify to the truth, Pilate responds with the question of the ages. He says, "What is truth?"

Pilate is a success in the rough and tumble world of Roman politics. He's smart. He's ruthless. He's powerful. He's gotten where he is by beating a lot of others who would have been glad to have his place, a lot of others who even now would just as soon stab him in the back, if they had half a chance. And so Pilate leaves little to chance. He's led the Roman cavalry up from the coast. He is in Jerusalem for the Passover. A flood of pilgrims come from the countryside for the observance. Every year Pilate wonders at the emperor's wisdom in letting

the Jews keep their own religion. Some of them bow to the emperor, but only grudgingly. Others sow outright sedition. Pilate has an uneasy pact with the Jewish authorities, who for their own reasons wish to keep the crowds under control. For the authorities, keeping their religion by the slenderest thread, residing in Jerusalem, their temple right next to the Roman fortress, know all too well that Rome's tolerance would evaporate at the slightest provocation. The religious holidays always seem a tender-keg to both the Jews and the Romans. Everyone's nerves are on edge.

Already this year there is agitation. The authorities have brought Pilate a ragged preacher. They've said he is a trouble-maker. More than that, he's a pretender to royalty. They've said that he says he's the king of the Jews. It's a provocative charge, treason, really. The Jews may have been allowed to keep their religion, but Caesar was emperor and his appointees ruled the land. A claim to be king of the Jews would have been a hostile and aggressive move, outright sedition.

When the politically-astute Pilate looks at Jesus, though, he sees no monarch or even a monarch pretender. Gaunt, frayed, unkempt, alone, weak. He doesn't look like a king, nor much of a threat, either. Pilate is perplexed. But he's been presented with the charges. He must at least minimally follow his duty. He asks directly, incredulously, "Are you king of the Jews?" One wonders how he asked the question: *Are* you king of the Jews? *Are you* king of the Jews? *Are you king* of the Jews? Each way makes a difference, to be sure. But in the end, Pilate, no matter which way he said it, Pilate meant it skeptically. And he didn't really care. He had no patience to even follow the line of his own thinking. His mind wanders.

Jesus says brings him back to focus, "Do you ask this yourself, or is this what they told you?" Pilate is annoyed. Insolence. Prisoners don't ask questions of the Roman Governor. But Pilate doesn't have the energy to follow that line of thinking to its conclusion, either. Pilate answers, essentially, "Look, it would have never occurred to me to ask you, to ask you, if you were a king. I don't understand the people of this land. They're the ones that have handed you over with this ridiculous charge. What *have* you done to make them want to get rid of you, anyway?"

But Jesus startles the Roman governor. He as much as says that he *is* a king. He says, "My kingship is not from this world. If my kingship were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingship is not from here." Jesus is trying to draw Pilate into a subtle conversation. Pilate has said he would never think of Jesus as a king. Jesus responds that he is a king, but his authority doesn't come from this world.

But Pilate has no interest in metaphysics. He's a practical man, and the governor wants to dispatch this piece of ludicrous legal business as quickly as possible. He sticks to the point without understanding Jesus' meaning. "Then you are a king?" he says. Jesus answers him in a way that Pilate again has no interest in following, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." With a dismissive wave of his hand, Pilate responds with enigmatic words of his own, "What is truth?"

Pilate was no philosopher. He was a realist. As much as it's tempting to think of him asking a deep question, Pilate was simply dismissing the question entirely. He knew truth, and it wasn't some ethereal, ethical concept. He knew the truth that if you didn't watch your back, a rival would stick a sword between your ribs. He knew the truth that it was better to be feared than loved. He knew the truth that truth was a fungible commodity, a thing to be tempered by

practicality. Was it true that Caesar was a God? For Pilate the question would have had little theological or theoretical interest. The emperor was a God simply because he had to power to make you say that he was. Period. End of discussion.

It's too bad. It's too bad that Pilate didn't take more interest in his conversation with Jesus. I suppose he couldn't have, really. If he had grasped even a spark of it, it would have raised too many questions about the world he took for granted.

"My kingship is not from this world. If my kingship were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingship is not from here." That was nonsense to Pilate. Jesus was staking claim to kingship, but to Pilate he looked like a vagabond, not a king.

But how are we to understand Jesus' claim to be a king. Many Christians are understandably uneasy about this language of Jesus as king. They rightly point out that kings and Lords are not exactly the models we should want for God. Kings and Lords are overbearing, oppressive, violent. They impoverish their subjects and treat them like property. So how do we handle Jesus' claim to kingship?

Actually, Jesus would agree 100% with our concerns. In fact, that's his point exactly. That we miss the point means that we probably miss it much in the way that Pilate did. Jesus came to announce a different kind of kingship, one that was meant to replace the kind of kingship that Pilate and Herod and Caesar exemplified; not just replace them, but replace their kind of kingship. Do you see the difference? Jesus as king was not just another conquering hero. When most kings, most rulers, most governments replace one another, not much changes. The flag changes. Maybe the state language changes. But one king or power is pretty much like another, which is why we sometimes resist calling Jesus a king. If he's just another one of them, then why bother? But Jesus is talking about a replacement far more significant than replacing Herod with Jesus.

Jesus says, "If my kingship were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over." In other words, if my kingship were business as usual, replacing one power with another, it would be normal warfare until you or I were defeated. The first difference to notice is that Jesus' kind of kingdom is not gained by victory as we normally understand it.

Also, Jesus' kingship is so different that Pilate couldn't even be in his kingdom. For Jesus claims, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." That is, everyone who comes into my kingdom hears my voice and follows me. Pilate could not hear Jesus' voice when Jesus was standing right in front of him. Pilate thought Jesus was speaking nonsense.

Oh, what he and the rest of them missed. The testimony of the truth. When Jesus said that he was the truth, he, of course, meant it at very many levels. But the levels begin with the meaning that many of us abandon with our childhood: the plain-dealing of a child. Like Pilate, or even like my mother, or myself, or maybe yourself, we become convinced that truth is a little too naive. However, if we're not careful, we can lose track of it entirely. On the other hand, Jesus presents us with a kingdom that begins with integrity. What a glorious kingdom that is to imagine. And the truth is, the truth is we can move in its direction, we can move toward it, if we but refrain from calling it nonsense. Amen.