

**John 18:28-40** Common English Bible

<sup>28</sup> The Jewish leaders led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Roman governor’s palace.<sup>[a]</sup> It was early in the morning. So that they could eat the Passover, the Jewish leaders wouldn’t enter the palace; entering the palace would have made them ritually impure.

<sup>29</sup> So Pilate went out to them and asked, “What charge do you bring against this man?”

<sup>30</sup> They answered, “If he had done nothing wrong, we wouldn’t have handed him over to you.”

<sup>31</sup> Pilate responded, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your Law.”

The Jewish leaders replied, “The Law doesn’t allow us to kill anyone.” (<sup>32</sup> This was so that Jesus’ word might be fulfilled when he indicated how he was going to die.)

<sup>33</sup> Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?”

<sup>35</sup> Pilate responded, “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”

<sup>36</sup> Jesus replied, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that the Jewish leaders wouldn’t have arrested me. My kingdom isn’t from here.”

<sup>37</sup> “So you are a king?” Pilate said.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.”

<sup>38</sup> “What is truth?” Pilate asked. After Pilate said this, he returned to the Jewish leaders and said, “I find no grounds for any charge against him. <sup>39</sup> You have a custom that I release one prisoner for you at Passover. Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?”

<sup>40</sup> They shouted, “Not this man! Give us Barabbas!” (Barabbas was an outlaw.)

Poor Pilate – he’s between a rock and a hard place! Pilate has to navigate between Roman and Jewish interests to keep a type of peace.

He’s Jerusalem’s Roman-appointed governor, a puppet of the emperor Tiberius. He enforces order and avoids imperial displeasure.

In the book of John, Pilate consults with the Jewish leaders outside the palace and Jesus, shackled before him. He goes back and forth between them three times, trying to figure out a politically expedient solution.

We may feel a little compassion for Pilate as he struggles to make his decision. In history, though, Pilate is a nasty guy. Jewish writers in his time, like Josephus, say that he is cynical, politically calculating, devious, and brutal.”<sup>1</sup>

And we may feel dismay at the actions of the Jewish leaders. Three times, Pilate asks members of the Sanhedrin if they want to let Jesus go. Finally, he offers them a choice between crucifying the murderer Barrabas or Jesus, the Jewish teacher and healer. He asks, “Shall I release your king?”

Although it’s near the sacred time of Passover, they reply, “We have no king but the emperor,” pandering to Pilate and denying the sovereignty of their own God. Their choice is Jesus. At a fever pitch, the crowd cries, “Away with him! Crucify him!”

I want to make one point here before we go any further. We live in a time of increasing anti-Semitism. The depiction of Jewish leaders in this passage has resulted in accusations of anti-Semitism in the book of John. However, scholars say we must consider that Jews are portrayed favorably throughout the gospel. In John, we see that Jesus himself is a practicing Jew, that all his followers are Jewish, and that Jesus’ words and the beautiful opening hymn of John echo the teachings of the Hebrew Bible. Given the context of ubiquitous violence in Rome, we might understand how difficult it is for Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to stay on the good side of those in power. <sup>2</sup>

So, let’s turn to the crux of our passage today.

<sup>37</sup> “So you are a king?” Pilate asks Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Bible Hub and others

<sup>2</sup> Jesus in the Gospel of John by Lindsey Scott

Jesus answers, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth.”

<sup>38</sup> “What is truth?” Pilate replies.

Is Pilate dismissing Jesus’ claim with skepticism? As if to say, “Truth is unknowable—why bother?” Is he avoiding the Sanhedrin’s charges so he can release Jesus? Or is he honestly inquiring about the nature of truth, but has to move on as the crowds rage outside? In any case, Pilate avoids moral responsibility by quickly leaving before Jesus can answer. <sup>3</sup>

Many of us recall the famous line spoken by Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*. “You want the truth?! You can’t handle the truth!”

Why is it so hard to hear and speak the truth?

Of course, there are many situations in which we might think twice before speaking the truth. We avoid telling the truth for fear of alienating or hurting friends and family. We don’t want to talk about family secrets because it would open a can of worms. We bend the truth to make a point or look a little better.

Looking at our world and its systems, there are so many reasons it’s hard to trust “the truth”. Our politicians lie to back up seemingly random decisions. It’s hard to trust news sources. Our own criminal justice system is designed to establish the facts, but testimony is often based on lies. The government is trying to censor universities. Immigrants and justice workers can’t bring undue attention to themselves and must hide their identities.

Because the truth is bent at every turn, we must ask continually, “What’s the truth?” We rightfully may become cynical. And perhaps like Pilate, we might seek expediency in our decision-making to hedge our bets.

This distrust leads to a transactional culture. A world where people manipulate to get their way, where we give to get, and expect returned favors. Where people protect themselves at all costs to live a comfortable individual life or to gain more power.

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<sup>3</sup> Bible Hub: [What did Pilate mean by asking, "What is truth?" in John 18:38?](#)

We are so used to this that we may develop an image of God that is also transactional... if you behave, you will go to heaven. If you believe a certain way, God will love you more. Deep down, do you find yourself thinking that God offers love, power, and privilege based on your own goodness?

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Thank God, Jesus offers an alternative to earthly kingship. “I have been born and come into the world for this: to witness to the truth” (John 18:38).

Jesus' entire life and even his death are a testament to the truth of God's love.

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God's truth is different than human truth. God's love is not a response to our actions, beliefs, or life situations. The book of John is a treatise about the self-giving, unconditional Love of God – that's the truth Jesus lives by.<sup>4</sup>

As the book of John so beautifully communicates in its opening words, God's love existed before time and continues beyond our time on earth.

Jesus lives out God's true value of love. Not false human values that get so mixed up with confused allegiances and fear of reprisals, as Pilate demonstrates.

Jesus testifies to the truth each day through his actions, rather than relying on words that people may find untrustworthy. Jesus says in John 14:11, "Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves".

As we have learned from our study of John this year, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion characterize Jesus' love, transcending cultural norms and expectations.

His love is marked by selflessness, and it is a love that extends to enemies.

Jesus draws close to people who are outcasts in society. He pauses in his busy day and heals those who are sick in body and mind.

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<sup>4</sup> David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/christ-the-king-b-not-of-this-world/>

He shows understanding and patience toward his followers, no matter how annoying they can be at times.

He encourages people in their malaise and fear.

He weeps when Lazarus dies, for himself perhaps, but probably also for his family.

He cares for his disciples by humbly washing their feet, and he commands them to love one another.

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Jesus says to Pilate, who stands in for the Powers that Be: “I have been born and come into the world for this: to witness to the truth” (John 18:38).

We might ask ourselves, for what have we been born and come into the world? To what truth are you witnessing so others may see and know?

This Lent, as we journey to the cross, the image of the maze is apt for our times. In these very difficult days, where power is expedient, where we cannot trust the words of our leaders, where we have little power, where we don’t know what will happen next, and where it feels like everything may implode. In these days, we must lean on The Truth, with a capital T, to get through this maze of deception, wrong turns, and fake-outs.

This congregation gives us many opportunities to show our truth through God’s love, through service to others, and by standing up to injustice. We do and we must.

And let’s not forget how attentive love, as Jesus exemplified, can change the world.

The other day, I heard an NPR interview with a lawyer who gave a popular TED Talk on mediation. She works with people who feel angry, who are in a relationship impasse, who want something from another person but are not getting it. Maybe a business associate, maybe an estranged spouse. In other words, these people are in a transactional stance, vying for who gets what.

She shared the most important question to ask two people who are at odds with one another: “Tell me…” Tell me about what you need. Tell me about your point of view. Please tell me what you hope for. Tell me what you would accept.” Successful mediations start there, not in adversarial confrontation.

That’s something we all can do to wage love in our families, with our neighbors, and with one another here. We can take the time to ask, Tell me about what matters to you. Tell me about your fears and concerns. Tell me about your dreams. Tell me about your family. Tell me about your culture. Tell me about the freedom you yearn for.

This kind of curiosity helps us to brave the truth. We CAN handle the truth. Together, we can take a long, loving look at what’s real.<sup>5</sup> and begin to chart a course through the maze together for the future of our congregation and our society.

As this congregation enters a time of discernment, ordained clergy and lay leaders will live out their vows to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. All of us can live out these vows as loving Christians.

Can we courageously investigate the truth of our circumstances as a local church? Wonder together, listen to one another, ask open-ended questions that don’t have obvious answers? Can we continue to walk through this maze together, dedicated to practicing Jesus’ attentive love?

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Jesus is a different kind of King from a different kind of Realm. A realm of Truth that is grounded in Love. “Jesus’ mission to make God known to the world remains alive as he offers his disciples and us life, love, and comfort to take this mission on ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

As we come to the end of the book of John, we look toward the cross and the Resurrection. But we’re not there yet. Let’s take a long, loving look at the real together as we approach Jesus’ life-giving death. We admit that the world remains harsh and difficult, and we keep our eyes open. Let’s lean on Jesus’ attentive love and one another as we look into the future together.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Burghardt

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Lose