

Colossians 1:24-29; 2:6-8
John 18:33-38

FOOL'S TRUTH

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

There is perhaps no greater illustration of miscommunication anywhere in human writing than this account of a conversation between Jesus of Nazareth, carpenter of Galilee, and Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Judea. Pilate has no idea what Jesus is talking about. Jesus doesn't try very hard to get on common ground, seeing that the ground between them is so far apart. Yet Jesus' life is at stake, and Pilate doesn't really want to order His death. A very strange interlude in the world's most famous story.

The problem is that Jesus is not coming out of nowhere. He is not representing something that can be pinpointed in a specific moment, in one historic incident, on one calendar day. He comes out of a two-thousand-year tradition, a holy history of God at work in the world – God working in and through a special people set aside for this very purpose. Pilate wants to know, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate has no idea what that means. Sadly, *most* of the Jewish kings had no idea what that was supposed to mean. What Pilate is trying to find out is: "Are you an insurrectionist? Are you a nutso zealot with delusions of grandeur who needs to be exterminated before you get a lot of people hurt?"

What does Pilate know of Abraham? Of Moses, or the Holy Mountain, or the Covenant? What does Pilate know of the Promises, or of David, or of the string of holy prophets who kept turning the people back to their vision and purpose for a thousand years? And now Jesus stands before Pilate in culmination of all of this – but also of God's dramatic new

move to continue all that has been carried at so great a cost, through so many years. Only, nobody sees this clearly yet. It isn't even Easter! How is Jesus supposed to communicate any of this to Pilate – under these circumstances – in five minutes or less?

What can Jesus say to Pilate? “Forgive me, Pilate, but you have absolutely no concept of what is going on here. No offense, Pilate, but spiritually speaking, you are almost totally illiterate. The highest thoughts – the highest allegiance you have ever thought about in your entire lifetime – concern a mere, puny, self-centered human being sitting on a throne in what you think is a really grand palace in Rome. I am sent from – and my commission comes from – the numinous, omnipotent, omniscient Designer and Creator of the Universe. And while God cares about you and Rome and everything and everyone in the world far more than you know, God is not *impressed* by Rome, or your Emperor, any more than I am impressed by your authority. Rome does not understand what God is doing, and is not helping the world move in God's direction. Rome's grandeur and greatness are a temporary figment of your imagination. What I came for, and what I came about, will still be gathering strength and changing people's lives when your Empire is only a dim memory, studied by many only because I was here. And you, Pilate – you will be remembered for thousands of years, but only because you spoke with me.”

Can Jesus say this to Pilate? What good will it do? How can Pilate hear it? It is hopeless. Pilate seems so wealthy and strong. Jesus seems so poor and defenseless. Yet things are not always what they seem. Pilate's power and authority are unspeakably minuscule in comparison to Jesus' power and authority. In only six brief years, Pilate will be recalled from Judea in disgrace, his political career over. And only a few years after that, Pilate will stand with Jesus in a very different setting, with very different rules. What will Pilate say about truth then, when he experiences the compassion and mercy of the Prince of the Universe – and of dimensions far beyond any universe?

“*What is truth?*” Clearly Pilate asks this question to chide Jesus' naive comments. What Pilate means is, “There is no truth.” Truth is a subjective delusion. Truth is one person's opinion, based on hopes and dreams that have no basis in reality – at least not in any scientific or factual reality, or on anything empirically provable. And the truth is, our culture and our society have decided to side with Pilate on this, not with

Jesus. "Truth" is a bad word in our time. It is not politically correct to claim to know any truth. Our age is afraid or ashamed to claim any truth. What if it hurts somebody else's feelings? Even worse, what if it commits us to something?

When I say things like that, some of you think it is sarcasm, or mockery. Well, maybe just a touch. But I have a lot of sympathy for us also. It is not easy to live in a world that changes as fast as ours does. More than ever before, we have a need to stay versatile. You could wake up any morning and find out that some long-held understanding of reality has just been disproved. When I was a kid, the mountains were stable. It took millions of years to make them and millions more to wear them down, and we wanted men to match our mountains. Now whole mountain ranges can be formed in a few hundred years and maybe destroyed overnight, and the mountains match our teenagers. Today we want our men to match some pathetic feminine notion of what a man ought to be. What is truth? Whatever it is, it gives us vertigo.

You could wake up any morning and find out that your job is obsolete; that government grants will no longer support the arts; that your stocks have suddenly redefined your picture of retirement. There is no tenet of basic morality that has not changed its flavor and definition, either a little or a lot, in my brief lifetime. My father thought it was a privilege to pay income taxes – an honor to be a contributing citizen of this great country. My mother thought sex was for after marriage. My sister thought we went to school to see how much we could learn. My pastor thought we went to church to worship God. Can you imagine?! I hardly ever run into anybody who believes any of these things anymore. What is truth?

Even the concept of truth itself has changed dramatically in the last thirty years. Well, we have always connected truth with reality in some ways, but there used to be a level of truth far higher than that. "*O send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me.*" (Psalm 43:3) "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:24) Clearly, in such usage, "truth" is bigger than fact. "*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'*" (John 14:6) Most of us are pretty sure that Jesus was talking about more than being accurate in math or physics.

Thirty years ago, the dictionary had among the definitions of truth: "a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality ... an ideal or fundamental

reality apart from and transcending perceived experience.” In my current dictionary, all such dimensions are gone. “Truth” is “conformity to knowledge; ... most commonly used to mean correspondence with facts.” To be “truthful” (full of truth) today means you do not knowingly tell lies; you tell it like you see it at the moment. You think *that* is all it takes to be full of *truth* (truthful)?!

“A Psalm of David. O LORD, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill? He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.” (Psalm 15) To which we would add: Of course he will never be moved; in our society, he would be dead in five minutes.

Fool's Truth. Any truth that is not God's Truth is Fool's Truth. It may help us to accomplish Fool's Goal, but it only leads us into a Fool's Paradise. “Let Pontius Pilate be your guide.” No, God help us, that is not what we want. We do long to find a truth and keep it – to live for it, and to honor it. “I would be true,” we used to sing. We wanted to hone in on values that lasted, on purposes we would never betray. Some of us still do.

Well, does Christianity – the Christian Path or Way – have anything to do with this? In a world that changes so fast, where our schedules are so busy, where we get weary, confused, betrayed, hurt – and also in a world where we get blessed, helped, befriended, valued – is it possible to find truth and live for it?

First of all (and I cannot stress this enough), Christianity expects you to fail – to fall short – from time to time. Who do you think you are?! *Where* do you think we are? Have you seen a sign somewhere announcing that we are already in Heaven? Christianity expects us to change our understanding of what God wants of us – as we walk the Path. Christianity expects us to be untrue, from time to time, no matter how much we may be determined and strive to be true. The essence of Christianity is not that we never goof, never stray, never fail, never betray our Lord. The essence of Christianity is that we repent – get right back to the Path. We do not like being wrong. We do not like being separated from God. We do not like displeasing our Lord. But we do not expect to be perfect.

We work and hope and strive to keep shortening the amount of time it takes us to repent and get back on track, to get back on the WAY.

J. Golden Kimball, perhaps the most colorful and certainly the most notorious Mormon to ever become an Elder in that church, had spent his early years as a cowboy in a rough and unsaintly environment. One of the things he never quite got cleaned up was his language. You can see why I felt an instant liking for the man. Everyone I have ever admired, except for my father, had a special gift with bad language (Jesus, Peter, Paul, Augustine, Luther, to name a few). Otherwise straitlaced Mormons enjoyed telling stories about J. Golden Kimball – especially after he was gone. One time, the Bishop sent him to preach in a church near Ogden where some of the younger men were getting a little rowdy. Kimball had a high, squeaky voice, but a commanding presence. He got into the middle of his sermon and suddenly remembered why the Bishop had sent him. “By the way,” he said, “the President tells me some of you young bucks are getting a little out of hand up here. He says you’re carrying six-shooters around in your hip pockets. I want you to be careful. The damn things might go off and blow your brains out.”

Kimball was high enough up in the Mormon church to get into some real political battles from time to time. One day he was speaking at a gathering where there was considerable controversy and contention. He commented: “You know, there are those who would like to kick me clear out of the church. But they can’t do it. I repent too damn fast.”

We are about to share in the communion meal – to partake of the body broken. Jesus’ body was broken – and we are the body of Christ. Does that sound like we are participating in something perfect here? His blood was poured out – shed for the remission of our sins. Does that sound like we are participating in something perfect here? Christianity is not about doing it right all the time, or *acting* like we are doing it right all the time. Christianity is not about getting perfect, or thinking we are perfect now – like maybe we made a few mistakes at first, back in the past, but we have gotten over it now. Life is bigger and more serious than that. Every time we make some progress on the WAY, we also start seeing some ways in which we are still wrong that we never noticed before. Christianity is not about getting perfect. Christianity is about learning how to *repent too damn fast*. That does not mean we do not get to live for the truth. It only means we keep turning back toward it – over and over and over again.

FOOL'S TRUTH

There is a lot of Fool's Truth out there. All of us have suckered in to some of it, from time to time. It is truth dedicated to mere survival, or dedicated to success in a world that seems big for the moment but which is so temporary you would think even humans could see through the ruse. Satan's whole art is choreography that hides the truth: short-term values, instant gratification, momentary fame, get-rich-quick schemes. How many get-rich-quick schemes have a serious intention of bringing benefit to others? How many one-night stands really care about the future or the welfare of the partner?

What is truth? God's love is truth. Get in tune with that love, and do anything you like (a paraphrase from St. Augustine). The way we usually say it is: "Turn your will and your life – all of it – over to the guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ." Why does it take us so long to get it clear? Prayer is the most steady, constant, unwavering connection we have to truth. Oh yes, we can play games with prayer, but we don't have to. God wants the link – the prayer connection. If we want it too, we can live for the truth. The problem – and we all know it – is not that the link doesn't work. The problem is that we keep breaking the link. So let us repent once again, and go back to the meal, and get re-linked.