

SERMON FOR YEAR B, CHRIST THE KING (PROPER 29)

JOHN 18:33-37

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SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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"TRUTH"

I begin with a retraction from last week's sermon.

If you recall, I started the sermon by telling you all about Paul,

And what he must have been thinking when he wrote to the *Hebrews*

In the epistle of the same name that we have in the New Testament.

He probably didn't write it.

Who did?

Well, the question of its authorship is actually a pretty charged one,

But the point is not to be lost: Paul probably was *not* the author, and I said he was,

And I'm sorry for saying that.

There ... It feels good, doesn't it, to come clean like that?

A retraction and apology that took several days since realizing the error,

And that then just gestated until I could get in this pulpit.

What's the effect of all that?

For me, this time, it's actually kind of exciting

Because ever since I arrived here, I have felt that I've been able

To speak the simple truth and not hide from it.

Actually, for the Jesus of the Gospel According to John,

You could say that the pursuit of the truth, the *naming* of the truth,

Is one of the key metaphors for how he defines himself:

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"¹ ...

Or, again,

"If I tell the truth," he says, "why do you not believe me?"²

"I am the way and the *truth* and the life."³

And, in today's reading, he tells Pilate,

I came to testify to the truth,

*And the subjects of my kingdom are **those who belong to the truth.***

Starting at about this time last year,

And for a period that lasted a few months,

Something truly amazing happened in my life,

And I broke open out of the shell of myself and crawled out and flew away.

In my case, the thing that caused it was that I was simply *forced*

To tell a *highly potent truth* over an extended period of time.

¹ John 8:32

² John 8:46

³ John 14:6

Which I did, as faithfully as I knew how, although this truth I carried
Was so irradiated, as I say, that I had to deliver it wearing a metaphorical lead apron.

I had grown tired in my present ministry in Colorado. Tired.
I was sad.
It wasn't working; it didn't fit right; I was sick of fighting it.
I wondered sometimes if I had really perceived God's call to ministry correctly.
I'd sat in a place of discernment and prayer for quite a while,
And the answer was clear –
That for the sake of my family, myself, the church I served,
The person whose place I felt I was holding ...
I needed to seek a call beyond where I was.

So. I told the truth.
I needed to be where I currently was not;
I was holding place for the next person:
The whole thing –
And all the luxuries of having had this conversation by myself over the months,
Suddenly drifted away,
And a very cold and stiff breeze settled into my social existence there ...
As I began looking for a place, as *you* began looking again for a pastor.

But you know what else happened?
In the telling of the truth, I found a deep well of reliance upon the grace of God:
Jesus was right! I knew, *and told*, the truth, and *the truth set me free!*
I got unlocked, and I have been free and easy ever since.
I can't overexplain it; all I know is that I'm ... uncaged, and it feels good.

When I told the truth in that sustained and intense way,
The original and best me sallied out and fluttered free.

And this isn't just for pastors, you know.
It isn't the exclusive province of the ordained.
It's not for some Super-Christian (as if there even *is* such a thing).

In effect, Pilate says to Jesus,
They say you're a king. Let's talk a little shop: tell me about your kingdom.
Jesus says, in effect: Pilate, it's simple: those who practice the truth are in my kingdom.

Surely it's a long way from Jesus' kingdom to the kingdom of Rome.
This week I asked some of my Facebook friends:
What's the chief difference between the kingdom of Pilate and the kingdom of Christ?
I received some pretty astounding responses.
Roger Paynter, my homiletics professor from seminary, said,
"Not returning evil with evil."
Celeste, an old college chum, said that Pilate does what's *easy*, while Jesus does what's *right*.
"The cross," Jeff wrote.
"Self-offering," wrote Amy.

“Life,” said Phil, “and the opportunity to live it more fully.”

Liz wrote to say she’d asked the same question of her very plainspoken congregation
Of “mostly poor, working, Central American folk....

“The kingdom of Pilate is where power and might count,

Where there are no jobs unless you [have] ins with those in power,

Where the lighter your skin tone the better off you probably are,

Where women with cancer are turned away from emergency rooms,

Where men are in power ...

Where immigration reform means kicking people out who have been here for generations

And families are torn apart.

The kingdom of Christ[? W]ell things aren’t necessarily perfect

But no matter how little there is there is enough.

And stranger reaches out to stranger instead of tearing each other apart.”

She said, “We all decided that in the kingdom of Christ it is not tolerance that is valued

But intimacy[,] and so we dare to build relationships with one another.”

You know, that last word, to me, is the hardest of all:

That the Kingdom of Christ places intimacy above tolerance.

It’s easy to tolerate others, isn’t it

(For an hour or two a week, especially if they’re okay folk),

But it’s just about *impossible* these days to be intimate:

To really *want* to be in relationship with someone who’s not in your nuclear family.

And yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of Christianity’s best thinkers, wrote that

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

For the subjects of Christ’s kingdom, something false and vain falls away from us

Because we dare to be honest, to be real, to tell the truth and to live like it matters.

Something dies in those whom Christ has called – something hollow and unreal dies,

And the new thing God is doing has room to move and grow and work and pray in us.

And *that* is precisely the kingdom into which we now usher Sydney and Jackson

In the ultimate moment of truth: our baptism.

That’s right: It isn’t only their baptism; it’s a kind of recasting of our own baptism.

These two are not the only ones whose lives will be forever transformed this day.

We will *all* make promises in the Baptismal Covenant:

Promises so wide in scope, promises to do things so contrary, that if we did them,

The world would be turned upside down –

Filled with the truth, brimming with intimacy –

And yet promises that come with that grand qualifier: *I will, with God’s help.*

Sisters and brothers, that’s the only way any of this could happen anyway,

But neither does it get us off the hook.

“God’s help” is not an excuse for inaction; it is a constant prayer we pray while we act.

“With God’s help” will pray itself in us as we set about the work of the church:
To baptize, to teach, to remember and to feed the sheep of God.
That work is given to each and every one of us.

And now that we who make these promises on behalf of Jackson and Sydney,
Until they are old enough to make them for themselves –
Now that we understand what sort of kingdom they are being baptized into,
And now that we are about to claim that we, too, are the subjects of Christ’s kingdom,
Now that that’s been established,
Let us move with boldness: promises of truth and intimacy;
Water, oil, and fire.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Give us courage to speak and live the truth, and bring us closer together. Amen.