*Sermon Text for January 26, 2014*

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Exodus 20:1-17, John 18:33-40

“What is truth?”

It has been a great, fulfilling week this past one. The session and the deacons went away on a retreat at Sandy Cove to discern God’s calling for this church for the year to come. It really went well. On Friday there were 29 of us brainstorming and then honing in on God’s desires for us. The principle vision that this church faces deals with programs, personnel, and priorities dealing with our youth. I like that, the three P’s. But it didn’t come easy. We all had ways in which God was speaking to us in regards to what we felt should be our focus for the year here at the church.

We did have a great time though, we stayed up well past our bedtime playing dominoes, I never did win, hearts, and trash. It was a true mountain top experience where we topped it off with communion where we were reminded of the little boy who brought Jesus the loaves and the fish and we were encouraged to enter into this year not thinking that we have everything we need to know to minister to youth, but that the youth actually are able to teach us something if we would be open to receiving it.

It was a good week. I wish I could say the same for Jesus in this 18th chapter of John. He’s had a very bad, beginning with Thursday evening to now Friday morning day. In less than 24 hours he has experienced an mountaintop moment with his disciples, but then betrayed by Judas, arrested by the police, bound by the mob, denied by Peter three times, struck by a slave in the high priest’s house, and finally he finds himself in front of a man who thinks he controls his future. A man who would impose his vision on his life.

Both of our Scriptures deal with what is considered truth in light of God’s people. The 10 commandments that we read earlier have historically been considered the truth on which to base our actions. But Jesus sees things a bit differently as he interacts with Pilate. Let’s ask the question ourselves today, What is truth.

So why part II? The reason why is because back in May we were looking at John 8 and the title of our sermon was: “What is Truth?” It is there where we find my favorite Scripture where Jesus tells his disciples “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” Truth in a society based on relativism often offends our sensibilities so today we just may find ourselves making statements that may seem a bit dogmatic, but at times the truth requires bluntness.

One of the churches where Stacy and I pastored was called the Reformed Church of Naples, it was a great community and they worshipped in the same space as the Methodist Church worshipped that we also pastored. It took a few years but we were able to bring the churches together and share their rich heritage and worship experiences. One feature of the worship service of the Reformed Church was that every single Sunday they would read the 10 commandments either from the Exodus Scripture that we read today or from the Scripture in Deuteronomy 5. It was one of their defining features of their worship service. For that church the 10 commandments represented nearly the same as what it represented to Moses and the Israelites. This is truth. This is how we can know our God, through these commandments handed down to us.

What we learned in What is Truth, part 1, is that as Christians our identity ought to be taken from the truth that is not written on stone, or the law, but rather what is written on our hearts, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. What is truth, we learned, is in essence reflected wholly and completely and perfectly in our Savior, and in our Savior alone. There is no other truth except that which is defined through the prism of our Savior.

This is key to being able to see our Scripture today in John, because our Scripture today focuses not so much on Jesus as it does on Pontius Pilate. There is a debate raging between those who see Pilate as a villain and those who see him as a wanna-be saint. He is the one who gives us the famous quote at the end in verse 38: what is truth? Have you ever wondered how exactly he would have asked that question with Jesus in front of him? What is truth? Sarcastic, questioning, angry, menacing.

It does make a difference how he asks it. Is he someone who feels threatened by Jesus, or is he genuinely curious and wants to know more about what Jesus thinks. Or is he angry with Jesus and just wants to get rid of this trouble maker.

Our society today is fundamentally threatened by any attempt on our part to ascribe any ultimate truth to the faith that we follow. Unlike Jesus confronted by Pilate where it was very clear that he would not allow another king, only Caesar could be king, in the society in which we live today any king goes. So, it doesn’t really matter if Jesus is your King, as long as you don’t try to make him the only the King. As long as you don’t try to make him the only Way, the only Truth, The only Life and the only way to God. One of the reasons why society is threatened by our claims of exclusivity is that we often defend the singleness of Christ in ways that make us look defensive.

As Christians we have to stop being defensive. Look at how Jesus reacted to the situation. He was quiet to the point of maybe infuriating Pilate. I have your life in my hands, I can free you when I want to. Our automatic reaction would be, as Christians, to say that we on the side of right so that gives us all the ammunition we need to put ourselves ahead of others. Instead, in the quiet wise silence of our Savior who only answers the questions that are posed to him, you have Pilate declare to the crowd, “I find no fault in him.” The truth does not need to be defended by us, Jesus doesn’t need to speak up for himself. God has His means to do just that. The truth is stronger than any threat to the kingdom of God.

The Scripture today points us to the truth that Christ shared with Pilate. Yes, Jesus is a king but his kingdom is not recognized as truth in this world. The true kingdom of Christ is not one of a crown of gold, but rather a crown of thorns, it is not a kingdom of fine robes and silk but rather of tattered, bloodied, and spat upon garments, it is not a kingdom of white horses and chariots, but rather of donkeys and foals of asses, it is not a kingdom of rich and powerful people but rather of prostitutes, and beggars and homeless. It is not a kingdom of power, but rather one of strong humility.

This is the truth. This is the truth that we can choose to follow or we can ask the question that Pilate did: What is truth? We do it all the time in this country and this community. Like Pilate when we are confronted by the truth it makes us feel uncomfortable. We want to wash our hands of it and send it off somewhere else. When we are confronted by the truth of another random shooting we blame the NRA or the liberals who have taken away our sense of responsibility, we call it a lie, when we are confronted by the truths of a country that looks to go to war first in the name of democracy, we turn our backs and say that it doesn’t concern us, that’s up to the government. When we are confronted by the truths of a broken healthcare system we say Obamacare is socialist, maybe even communist, or that conservatives have no heart because they are happy to see the poor die on the streets . We have a habit of turning our backs to the truth and we do it by calling it all a lie and then going out before people and blaming others for our own inadequacies. It has been said that the truth only has one face, but a lie has thousands.

First Presbyterian we are beginning a journey today that necessitates the involvement of all of you who are truth seekers. Some of us would prefer to follow a truth that is static like the 10 commandments as opposed to a truth that is vibrant, singular and unique which is found in our Savior Jesus Christ. This journey our church leadership has decided for this year will focus on the youth and the truths that they are able to offer to us as we learn as the disciples did to accept and receive the loaves and fish which were offered by the youth. We will learn this year what it means to inherit the kingdom of God which is not possible unless we become a child.

2014 will be the year of the youth here at First Presbyterian Church. I hope you are excited by this. It does not mean that any will be forgotten, but rather that all will be included in this ministry. Are you one of those who sees modern technology as demon possessed? Well, we can have a youth come over to your house and cast out those demons while teach you how to work open that attachment that keeps disappearing. Our journey together this year will be exciting because it will allow us to see that every time that Jesus refers to the youth or children it is always in a positive context and in a context where we are able to learn from them, and not necessarily vice-versa.

As one elder mentioned, and this was a 50 year member elder, at times the church has to risk in order to understand what God’s desire is for its future. And that is the truth. Amen.