

Mount Carmel – Sunday, March 11, 2018

Thank you for the invitation to be with you this morning! Actually I should thank Pastor John in his absence . . . I know he's on vacation but I'm not sure where . . . hopefully somewhere warm.

It is good to see many familiar faces here this morning, and REALLY GOOD to see new ones as well! I know that Mount Carmel continues to reach out and to welcome in its neighbors as you share the love of Christ with this community.

For those whom I don't know, a very brief introduction: I'm an assistant to the bishop in the Mpls Area Synod, and I had the great privilege of working with your call committee a little more than a year ago when they selected Pastor John as your new pastor. I'm also a pastor who served almost 13 years at Grace Lutheran Church here in NE Mpls up until about three years ago.

My family and I are your neighbors – we live on 29th and Garfield just on the other side of the middle school, and I'm a frequent passerby the church when I'm out walking my dog along the parkway. She particularly likes the smells in the shrubs and bushes along the west side of your building (but I always clean up responsibly after her if she lingers too long there).

I bring you greetings on behalf of Bishop Ann Svennungsen and the rest of my colleagues in the synod office – and I think Pastor Deb Stehlin was just here to preach about a month ago or so(?). Mount Carmel is one of 146 congregations that make up our synod, ranging from New Prague and Belle Plaine on the south, to Watertown and Waconia to the west, to Cambridge and Isanti to the north, and all the city and suburban congregations in between. Some people say that our synod includes all the ELCA congregations in the metro area west of the Mississippi, and when you go to the other side of the river you're in the St. Paul Area Synod – but I have to remind them that this magical land of NE Mpls is actually NOT on the OTHER side of the river. So, I get a little sensitive about that sometimes . . .

The word “synod” means “walking together” or “on a journey together”, and that is really how we view our partnership with congregations like Mt. Carmel. The synod is not in a hierarchical structure “over” you, but it is alongside you – and so is the ELCA national churchwide organization. We are all learning together how to be the church in rapidly changing times in a rapidly changing culture.

We support churches with finding new pastors, training lay leaders, and we organize collective ministries in important areas like environmental stewardship and racial justice and gender equality. And we accompany churches who are going through the difficult process of discerning whether or not they have the financial and human capacity to continue their ministry. In fact, I'll be leaving shortly after worship today to go and meet with a Church Council in north Minneapolis who is asking itself these hard questions.

I could say more about this synod, and about how we work with congregations like Mt. Carmel, but I think it's time to move right to today's scripture reading. And I must admit that I wish there was a bit more of a cheery reading for us to spend some time with this morning. But this *is* Lent, six-week season of the church where we are encouraged to look honestly and intentionally at ourselves, and reflect on what kind of changes may be in order as we seek to align or realign our lives with God.

And there's one phrase that cries out to me from this passage as I look at my life and the world as we know it today – and I'm curious if it does for you, too. They are the words of Pilate at the end of his tense conversation with Jesus when he can't seem to figure out who Jesus is.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

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Wow, I thought that was a question that we've only recently taken up in our postmodern, polarized, pluralistic American culture – but here it is at the heart of Jesus' movement toward the cross.

What is truth? This question takes on various forms today as we try to make sense of an increasing diet of alternative facts and fake news. I use these terms not to be political or flippant, because alternative facts and fake news are terms that have remarkably become part of our common civic vocabulary in the past few years. They follow a trend that started in the early 2000's as science, religion and politics seemed to take greater liberties with what was considered truth.

Comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term "truthiness" to describe how something feels like it should be true even if it's not really backed up by evidence or actions. It became Merriam Webster Dictionary's word of the year in 2006. Ten years later in 2016, the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year was "post-truth", which was defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.

What is truth? Issues that are in the news and in our awareness virtually every day and make us face this challenging question, and while they make us weary, we can't overlook them. What is truth:

- When it comes to Russian interference in our elections?
- In the president's relationships with other world leaders, and with women outside of his marriage?
- In the debate between the right to own guns, and the right to public safety in a country that cherishes its freedoms?
- In the continuing revelations of sexual harassment endured by women in so many sectors of our society?
- As white Americans increasingly revisit and relearn the history of oppression and discrimination endured by people of color in this country (indigenous peoples, and immigrants, and slaves), and how can this truth help us pursue a future with more justice and equity for all people?
- [NCAA investigations of major college basketball programs paying players and their agents?]

What is truth? Pilate asked this question of Jesus, but he was not interested in a philosophical or theological discussion that might lead to greater enlightenment. Pilate asks the question because he is trying to deal with a problem – quickly – and that problem is Jesus.

You see, Pilate was sent back to Jerusalem by the Roman Emperor to serve second term in office. He had served there previously, and then was promoted to rule a nice district along the Mediterranean Ocean. But there was unrest and violence in parts of Judea, so the Roman Emperor assigned Pilate to go back to Jerusalem to "make Judea great again." And yes, I am trying to be a bit cutesy there . . .

When the religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate and ask him to deal with him, this just adds more work to his plate. So he brings Jesus in for interrogation, and they seem to get nowhere fast. It's one of those conversations where they answer each other's questions with another question:

- "So Jesus, are you the King of the Jews?"
- "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"
- "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" "I don't know, what have you done?" "I asked you what did you do?"

But then Jesus makes the statement that befuddles Pilate and gives us clarity about who Jesus is. Jesus says, "my kingdom is not of this world . . . **If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.**"

Pilate, "So, you are a king?" You see, this idea does not fit any kind of really register anywhere in Pilate's brain. Kings and rulers with true authority don't stand alone unprotected when they are challenged. They have body guards, they have armies – they have people fighting to keep them from being handed over.

But this is not how the authority of Jesus works. Jesus tells Pilate that he came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice." Pilate seems impatient with such babbling, so he ends the conversation with one last question that is more dismissive than inquisitive: WHAT IS TRUTH?

What is our truth? What is your truth? It's a good question for us: Where do we find truth, where do we look for authority and guidance in our lives? In a culture of alternative facts, it seem like one can find research or statistics or data to justify almost any position on almost any issue. Or, one can find enough support in the "truthiness" of like-minded groups that dialogue with people holding different opinions isn't necessary – it can even be seen as weak to try to with someone you disagree with.

But in the kingdom of God, we don't have to prove or argue or fight our way into the truth. Jesus has already done that work.

For Jesus, truth is not some objective fact or well-reasoned idea that is obvious to everyone – as if that even exists. For Jesus, truth is a relationship with God through him that reflects God's grace, and justice, and forgiveness. Truth is not a thing, it is a person – it is Jesus himself. But because this truth is not of this world, it is also a way that leads to the cross. It is countercultural, and disarming, and oddly threatening to those who expect truth to come through argument or authority or might.

But here is the good news! While the kingdom of God does not follow the rules of this world, God so loved this world that Jesus was sent into it to bear witness to the truth, and love and justice of God. Rather than ask "What is truth?", we ask "Who is truth?" and in faith we can answer, Jesus Christ.

In this way, as followers of Jesus we are living in a world of virtual reality. We see the world as it is, full of progress but also full of injustice and disappointment. But over that reality we place the virtual truth filter of God's vision for justice, and peace, and freedom for all of God's children. We start to see the world differently – we can see what's possible, what's needed, and how we can be the ones to make a difference.