

The Truth Will Set You Free

March 21, 2008

(Good Friday - Year A)

John 18:1-19:42

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

It is an honor and a privilege, once again this year, to stand in this pulpit, as we come together as two congregations under one roof, to observe this noon hour.

For at noon, we remember that it was at this hour that our Lord Jesus Christ was lifted high upon the cross.

It is a brave thing that we do today, a thing that most people in our society cannot stomach.

It is a brave and courageous thing to stand at the foot of the Cross and to ask Jesus, along with Pontius Pilate:

“What is truth?”

When I was a student at the University of Texas in Austin, I lived on the northwest side of campus.

And, because I was an accounting major, most of my classes were in the Business School, which was on the opposite, southeast side of campus.

This meant that, every day, I walked across the 40 Acres that Longhorns love so much.

These walks to and from classes took me past the University of Texas Tower each day.

On the main plaza, at the base of the Tower, an inscription is written in large, all capital letters on the Main Building.

The inscription says:

“Ye Shall Know the Truth,
And the Truth Shall Make You Free.”

As I walked past those words every day, the implication, in an academic setting, was that the classes and labs and lectures I was attending were somehow imparting the truth to me.

Yet, reading these words as a follower of Jesus Christ, the inscription on the Main Building at the University of Texas is actually a verse

from the Gospel of John, the King James Version of John 8:32 to be exact.

In a more modern translation, Jesus says:

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”¹

On Jesus’ last day on earth, he is standing before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

As Jesus is standing there, Pilate baits him with questions.

To which Jesus replies:

“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

Then, Pilate retorts with the question that has been asked for centuries:

“What is truth?”

Jesus is mysteriously silent.

Because, as is the case in the whole of John’s Gospel, Jesus does not speak so loudly with words, as he does with actions and with signs.

John’s Gospel is full of signs:

Jesus changes water into wine, he makes the blind man see, he raises Lazarus from the dead.

You see, Jesus does not need to answer Pilate’s question with words.

Jesus answers the question through his actions.

Jesus answers Pilate’s question by being lifted high up on the Cross.

What is Truth?

The truth is that, like Jesus, all of us have been crucified.

The truth is that we have already been killed.

The truth is that we are dead.

And this is the truth that sets us free.

When Pilate asks Jesus:

“What is Truth?”

I would like to see Jesus respond in the same way as Jack Nicholson would in the movie, “A Few Good Men.”

¹ New International Version

In my make-believe version, Pilate asks Jesus:
“What is Truth?”

And, Jesus replies, in Jack Nicholson fashion:
*“You want Truth?
You can’t handle the truth!”*

*The truth is that you, Pilate, and Peter, and Mary, and the whole
stinking bunch of you are already dead.
You want the Truth?
You can’t handle the truth!
Instead, you deny your death.
You go and get a facelift.
You shoot yourself up with steroids and human growth hormone.
You put yourself on life support machines,
All because
You can’t handle the truth!”*

The Truth is that we are dead,
Because all of us have been crucified in baptism.

You see, my friends, we are the only religion in the world that says that
in order to become one of us - you have to die.
And so, our initiation ritual is more deadly than any fraternity hazing
ritual.

In order to become a Christian,
We push your head under the water until you can barely breathe.
We make sure that the font becomes your watery grave.
Then, we take the hot iron of our oily finger and we brand you with a
mark, with a cross, that can never be removed.

Saint Paul writes about this deadly initiation in his Letter to the Romans
when he asks:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ

Jesus were baptized into his death?”²

Therefore, my brothers and sisters,
If the truth is that we have already been crucified, dead and buried,
Then, how does this truth set us free?

Last week, I was taking my oldest son to a doctor’s appointment,
And I picked up a magazine in the waiting room.
In that magazine was an article from a man in his 40s who had received
a terminal diagnosis of cancer, indicating that he only had a few
more months to live.
In this article, this man told about how the news of his imminent death
had set him free,
How his impending death had set him free to change his life.

Rather than going to boring, business breakfast meetings, he was now
eating breakfasts of Cheerios and milk with his children.
Rather than sending trite e-mails to his buddies, he was now taking long
walks with his friends, talking at length about life and love and
friendship.
Rather than grabbing fast food for dinner, he and his wife were now
having friends and family over for dinner, sipping wine and
laughing around the table.

It took this man’s impending death to set him free to live the abundant
life that Jesus promises in John’s Gospel.
But, why should we wait until we receive a terminal diagnosis?

Since we have already been crucified and buried with Christ through
baptism,
If the truth is that we have already been killed,
Then, let’s start living this abundant life today!

For, if we know the truth,
If we know that the powers of this world have already killed us,

² Romans 6:3

Then imagine all the ways we are set free to live and to serve!

We can welcome the homeless and the undesirable poor into our churches.

We don't need to be afraid that they might sleep on our doorstep.

What can they do to us? - we are already dead!

We can give all of our money away with abandon to God.

We don't need to be afraid of giving away our children's inheritance.

What can they do to us? - we are already dead!

We can speak out against intolerance and bigotry and injustice.

We don't need to be afraid that other people will think that we are radical nuts.

What can they do to us? - we are already dead!

For as Martin Luther sings in his famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress":

"The body they may kill,

God's *truth* abideth still."

On Good Friday, Pontius Pilate looks Jesus in the eye and asks:

"What is truth?"

To answer that question, just see and survey the wondrous Cross of Christ.

On that Cross, Jesus will show you the Truth:

You are dead.

You are buried.

You are crucified with Christ.

And that Truth - will set you free.

AMEN.

© The Rev. Jeff W. Fisher, 2008