

What is Truth?

John 18:33-38a

September 25, 2022

As of 12:21 p.m. last Friday afternoon, we have a nine-year-old living in our house. I remember way back when we were expecting Samuel, and a good friend in our congregation in Atlanta, about a generation ahead of us, offered Sara and me this wisdom. “Every stage has its gifts,” she said, “and every stage has its challenges.”

One of the challenges of third grade—it turns out—is keeping up with the new vocabulary that arrives on the bus each afternoon. A few weeks ago, we were having dinner, and I was eloquently delivering my nightly dose of hilarious dad jokes. After one of them, Samuel looked at me and said, “Dad, that’s *sus*.”

Sara and I looked at each other. Should we be curious or furious? “Say that again, Sam.”

“That’s *sus*, Dad. You know...*sus*.” I did not know “*sus*.” But it turns out that Merriam Webster does. In fact, the makers of the dictionary had just added that word this summer, along with 370 others, to its ever-growing list of popularly used vocabulary. So, in case you don’t have a nine-year-old in your life...

“*Sus*: giving the impression that something is questionable or dishonest. Slang for suspect or suspicious.”

Now, it is no wonder why that word was added to the dictionary in 2022. You might say that we are living in the age of *sus*. Hardly a week goes by that I don’t read a new survey, study, analysis, or commentary describing the rapid decay of trust in our culture. And when there is no trust, there is only *sus*. Institutions once revered for their expertise or respected as authorities in their field are now disregarded or treated with, yes, suspicion.

Data confirms what you and I know by our own experience, that trust in religious communities, schools, elected officials, business leaders, and even our own neighbors is dangerously low. Here’s why I say “dangerously.” Because trust is the thread that weaves us together, and there can be little doubt in the age of *sus* that we are coming apart. More on that next Sunday.

To go one level deeper, trust relies on truth. That is, we build trust by sharing convictions in common that we hold as true. But in the age of suspicion, dishonesty is expected, truth questioned at every turn.

And with good reason. My mentor once described the role of the pastor as “being a worthy recipient of the trust and love of others.” We need not look far to see that many churches and church leaders have not been worthy of the trust of others. *Of course* people are suspicious of the church when the primary messages they hear are those that take the great and grand truth of the gospel and reduce it to narrow self-interest and small-minded pronouncement. *Of course* people are suspicious when large, vocal factions of self-proclaimed Christians privilege political expediency and nationalism over the call of Jesus so clearly described in the scriptures. “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

In this morning’s text from the Gospel of John, politics meets religion when the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate is the voice of suspicion. His questions show his desire to get to the bottom of this religious controversy causing him headaches—this controversy over the identity of some Galilean Jew he’s never met, whose teachings and actions are causing an uproar in the city at precisely the

wrong time. But Pilate's exchange with Jesus is frustrating because the two men are speaking different languages. Pilate speaks only of the need for order, for hierarchy—and therefore peace—in the kingdom. But Jesus speaks of a different kind of peace. Indeed, a different kind of kingdom. A deeper kind of truth. Finally, exasperated and getting nowhere in his line of questioning, the Roman Governor asks the question that is at the heart of John's Gospel from beginning to end. *What is truth?*

The story begins when the Word of God becomes flesh to live among us, full of grace and truth. And here at the close of the Gospel, Pilate asks, "What is truth?"

And then? Like the children this morning: Silence. No answer. No words.

I wish Jesus had replied. It would have made things so much easier for me. *You want to know the truth? Here it is. In Jesus' own words!* But Jesus didn't say a mumbling word. None are recorded.

I don't like that. I'm not very good at silence. I don't like silence, perhaps you don't either. Perhaps that's because it says *too much*. In the age of sus, we fill our lives and the world with words conveying contested truths and polarized perspectives. We cram words into every crevice of our lives. We shout, and we scream. We fill the comments sections with words. So many words on top of words.

Jesus is silent here. He has said all he needs to say. The answer to Pilate's question is given in the life he has lived, the message he has preached.

In the silence, perhaps we hear the echo of words earlier in the story, Jesus to his disciples: *"I am the truth."*

Listen. This is significant. Even transformative. Jesus does not say that religion is the truth. Indeed, religion is often in a contest with the gospel truth. Listen. Jesus does not say that a series of doctrines and statements are the truth. He does not say that knowledge is truth, and he certainly does not say that ideology is truth. No, the truth conveyed in the silence is the witness of a life defined by compassion

and grace. A life given away in sacrificial love.

What is truth? God does not give an answer; God gives God's own life. Without this, our message is meaningless, our foundation flimsy.

If you study the gospels closely, you will discover a frustrating pattern in the teachings and exchanges of Jesus. Rarely if ever does he answer a question directly with a simple statement. Far more often, his words take the shape of stories, of narratives. The gospel writer Matthew says Jesus did not teach anything that he did not teach in parables—stories, narratives, testimony.

When we are seeking the truth, we should start with story. Imagine if we listened and spoke not in the language of absolutes or litmus tests, but in the language of testimony.

Sometimes, this will mean honoring the hard truths that the stories of others have to teach us. Sometimes, this will mean asking ourselves uncomfortable questions. Sometimes, this will mean examining our own words and our actions a little more closely.

It's personal for me. For several weeks, I have been carrying this letter around with me everywhere I go. It arrived in my mailbox here at church. Local postmark. No return address. No signature. Now, it is not all that unusual for me to receive anonymous letters here at church. Most of the time, they get filed quickly and permanently, so as to avoid too much brooding over their contents with no way to respond. But this letter was different. I've struggled with this letter. I've wrestled with this letter. I've read it dozens of times. And finally, it hit me that the letter is addressed to you. *Dear Rev. Henry and the people of Second Presbyterian Church...*

From there, the letter tells the truth in the form of a story. The story of one among us whose journey has been filled with pain from a young age, who has been a searcher, a seeker, and who has come to this place in search of acceptance, and grace, and the gift of community. The writer describes the sacredness

of this worship space, the beauty of worshipping here, and the power of the message that we share. The letter continues, “And yet, it is still the loneliest place to be. Each Sunday, I debate whether to stay home and choose to be alone or go and know I will feel pain as I sit all by myself in the sanctuary. I especially dread the passing of the peace. Still, all I really need is just one person to say, ‘I see you. I see you’re alone. Would you like to come and sit with me?’”

The letter closes with these words: “I truly love this church and its people. I’m asking for you to come along and walk beside me and hold me up when the load gets too heavy... Thank you for listening to my story.”

What is truth? It is not, I think, a list of bullet points to which we must give intellectual assent. It is not the correct answer to a final exam. It is not a narrowness that excludes and divides. Truth is when we find the courage to tell our stories and name what we need. Truth is when we have the courage to listen to the stories of others and respond in faith and grace. Truth expands our vision. It deepens our understanding. It enlarges our compassion because truth asks something of us. Will you come along? Walk beside me when the load is too heavy? In silence, truth waits for our answer in the actions we take.

Jesus stands before Pilate, the man who has the authority to condemn him to death. And he is silent.

Marilynne Robinson has written, “Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense.”

Jesus will not speak in defense, for he has come to testify to the truth.

If we belong to the truth, we will hear his voice. Hear it in the silence of those who sit among you right now wondering if they belong. Hear it in the silence of those who have spent their years acquiring possessions and climbing the ladder and are finding that it all amounts to nothing. Truth in the silence of those who harbor resentment and refuse to let it go though they long to do so. In the silence of those

who want to hear the story of salvation as a story about them. In the silence of every person convinced that there is a better path, a better way than the division and the destruction that we now travel.

I do not know if the person who wrote this letter is here today or not. I do not know if you are listening at home. But here is what I want to say to you and to anyone who has felt left on the outside, to anyone whose story includes the pain of being made to feel less than fully welcome in the Body of Christ, anyone whose suspicion of the Church is justified by their lived experience, anyone who questions the integrity of a movement whose self-appointed emissaries condone the inhumanity of using vulnerable people to score political points, anyone whose fears and doubts nearly kept you away today. Hear me say this: *You belong here*. Not because I say so. Because God says so. We want to be your family of faith. And you sharing this testimony gives us the chance to try again.

If we belong to the truth, we hear the voice of Jesus. Not in shouts of self-righteousness, naming-calling, insults, temper-tantrum tirades. We hear the voice of Jesus. The whispers of what is true in the stories of others and the depths of our own souls. The truth of a God who risked life as an outsider and death as a criminal, who showed us that the meaning of life is to give it away in service to others. Yes, the truth of a God whose radically inclusive welcome will always confound and mystify us. *I am the truth*, he said. The truth of a way that leads to life. Life abundant. Life for all.

With courage and hope, let us live *that* truth together. Amen.