

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Truth”

John 18:33-38

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“What is truth?”

That might be one of the most important questions asked in the Bible, and the one who asks it may not want, or even be capable of hearing, the answer. The person asking the question, the region’s Roman governor, Pilate, is in a position where he—in the words of Colonel Jessup in the movie *A Few Good Men*—“*can’t handle the truth.*”

Who, besides Jesus, *can* handle the truth during these horrible and dangerous last few days before the crucifixion? No one.

Not the crowd who welcomed Jesus in Jerusalem,
not the crowd that now wants him killed,
not the religious leaders who are threatened by him,
not the political leaders who want calm,
not the disciples who swore they would never abandon him.

What are *our* chances of hearing the truth? Of seeing the truth?

Let’s listen to our reading from John’s Gospel and let’s try ourselves to hear what we find so threatening sometimes to hear: the true Word of God:

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “*Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?*” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “*I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?*” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “*My kingdom is not from 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.”³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

(The Word of the Lord!)

“False information travels further and faster than the truth.”¹ Dr. Seema Yasmin said that in a public radio interview. Dr. Yasmin switched careers moving from a medical practice to medical journalism. She specializes in investigating medical misinformation and disinformation. Here are three of the medical rumors she addresses:

Do flu vaccinations cause autism?

No.

Is MSG, so often associated with Chinese restaurants, addictive or unhealthy?

No.

Is there a correlation between poor teeth care and heart disease?

Actually, that one is true because your mouth is a portal to blood vessels.

Dr. Yasmin pointed out that the more **shocking** the medical myth, the more readily some people are to believe it. She says this is partly true because shocking lies are more interesting than boring facts *and* shocking lies usually are passed on through stories. Stories play on our emotions and create a “Whoa” reaction, and we instantly want to share the story with others and then it spreads. They are more believable because they are shocking, and even entertaining.

She went on to say that her research has borne out what other scholars and writers are trying to tell us: that once someone believes a lie, “it is harder to believe the truth than surrender a lie that you already believe.” That is because once we believe the lie, we invest ourselves in it. We have a greater desire to defend it than to examine it. Shoving facts at us usually doesn’t help. Neither does being snarky, or sarcastic, or shaming us for believing what we do. That usually causes us to dig in deeper because we are no longer defending the lie but defending ourselves.

Some people’s minds are more set than others. They can be quite open minded... until they take a stand, and then it is personal. Their feet are set in concrete and they won’t budge.

As hard as it is for individuals to be talked out of a lie they believe to be true, it is even harder for a group when others are there to back you up, or turn on you if you disagree. When the stakes are high, they will cheer you on, reinforce what you believe, and be personally hurt if you change your mind.

And it is even harder still when you get to the level of a herd. What I mean by a herd is a mass of people who have so invested themselves in some version of the truth that it becomes a part of their identity. It becomes a loyalty issue. Your instincts are to stay in the middle of the

¹ <https://kansaspublishradio.org/blog/dan-skinner/conversations-dr-seema-yasmin-viral-bs-medical-myths-and-why-we-fall-them>



herd for protection, especially when there is threat and the herd begins to stampede, because to change direction then might get you trampled.

Look how quickly the crowd that welcomes Jesus as a potential leader of an insurrection turns on him when he refuses to become one.

And look at Pilate, wondering if the mob outside his palace will turn on him.

Pilate is the Roman governor. He is supposed to have it within his power to impartially consider the evidence presented to him by Jewish leaders against this badly beaten man standing in front of him. What is that evidence?

Jesus is no insurrectionist. Yes, a nationalistic mob had welcomed him as someone with the blood of King David in him, as someone who would do today what David did then: unite Israel against all foes, foreign and domestic. Romans would be expelled, and Israel would be returned to its former national glory. But Jesus not only refused to be that kind of king. He never said or did anything in his ministry to suggest that he was trying to overthrow Roman rule. Then and now, he will only say that if he is a king, he is a king of another realm—God’s realm. If evidence of his actual words and actions of his life were considered, it would be clear that this other realm would be one in which Jew and Gentile—even Romans—would dwell because all would be reconciled and at peace.

That nationalistic mob is gone. Now there is another mob outside the palace. They have been whipped into a bloodlust frenzy by some priests, Temple leaders, Herodians, Pharisees... all Jewish leaders, both secular and religious... people who often are opposed but are now united in their opposition to the one whose past popularity with the people comes across to them as a threat. So, they’ve spread the entertaining lies that Jesus wants to destroy the Temple and that when he healed the sick he was engaging in **sorcery**. Those are some shocking and interesting lies that spread quickly.

The situation is dangerous... so dangerous that this hearing before Pilate is not really about hearing the truth. Someone has to be sacrificed. Jesus, Pilate, Barabbas... someone. The mob has so overwhelmed the truth that Pilate’s hands, which he later will wash, are really tied. He makes a weak attempt. He tells the mob that Jesus is not guilty of his crimes, but they roar that they would still rather have the murderer, Barabbas, released from prison than have Jesus go free.

That is when Pilate washes his hands of being accountable to the answer to the question he asked earlier, “[What is truth?](#)”

When Pilate asks that question, I am with the F. Dale Bruner in wishing I could be there to hear Pilate ask it because I would love to hear his tone.

Maybe Pilate’s tone is cynical. Maybe he is mocking Jesus for even suggesting that truth matters. Maybe he is one of those for whom facts and truths are irrelevant,

- Like those who are quick to spread lies as facts if it suits their purposes.
- Like publishers of scandal magazines or producers of programs for whom the question, “[Is it true?](#)” falls below other questions like “[Will it sell?](#)”, “[Is it interesting?](#)” and “[If we say it, can we be sued?](#)”
- Like some politicians, in speaking to their base, abandoning fairness and facts.



- Like internet trolls, gas lighters, and conspiracy promoters on the internet whose aim is not truth but simply to ignite a reaction and cause commotion.

Or maybe Pilate's tone is rhetorical. Maybe Pilate doesn't know what is true anymore. Maybe he once thought that being a governor meant that you get to lead rather than be led, that both the Emperor above him and the people beneath him will trust his judgment. But he knows already that the mob will *lead him* because they have made up their minds and the Emperor doesn't care what is true so long as order is maintained.

Maybe, Pilate is now the spokesperson for all those who once thought they had a handle on the truth, but don't know anymore:

- Those who knew the rules about how to live, but it didn't work out.
- Those who felt betrayed by someone or something they trusted: a family member, a friend, their cause, their party, their country, their god.
- Those who are hanging on because survival is the only thing that makes sense anymore.

Or maybe Pilate's tone is genuine. Maybe in that moment, Pilate is seeking an answer. Knowing Jesus is innocent, and maybe knowing something of Jesus' teachings and powerful acts of compassion, he wonders if Jesus knows something that he would like to know himself. While Jesus is standing there... while he is still alive... why not ask him... and then do what he needs to do?

Whatever Pilate's tone, here's the tragic point. The truth is not something Pilate *can* hear. Not now, with a dangerous and triggered mob outside. The reptilian part of the collective brain of the people has been engaged. I am talking about that "Fight, Flight, or Freeze" part of the collective brain that has lost the ability to calmly reason or give benefit of the doubt. We see that reptilian brain in charge right on through to when Jesus is crucified.

Fight: "Crucify him," is what the leaders want and what they encourage the mob to demand.

Flight: Jesus' disciples abandon him.

Freeze: While Jesus is being questioned by the High Priest, Peter is in the courtyard. He is asked if he is one of *them*... one of Jesus' followers. Peter denies even knowing him.

No one can hear the truth.

The irony of the passage is that the truth is standing right in front of Pilate. He can't hear the truth because he can't see it.

The truth is

Embodied-Innocence-and-Love standing there beaten and bloodied,
mocked and attacked,
and about to be crucified.

The truth is

that those who believe in God have abused God,
that those who are supposedly about keeping the order and peace of Rome
are about to kill an innocent man.



The truth is

that the leaders and the mob care so much about their version of the truth
that they will sacrifice God's truth to be proven right.

The truth is

what Jesus later says from the cross,
that the Jewish leaders who feel so threatened by him,
that the Roman leader who feels so threatened by the mob,
that the Emperor who mistakes enforced order for real peace,
that the mob who saw Jesus as the leader of an insurrection,
that the mob who now sees Jesus as a sorcerer and Temple destroyer,
and that justice in their hands
 simply because there are so many of them...
that all of them do not know what they are doing.

That is the God's honest truth that Jesus says from the cross, and it is hard to hear... that they don't know what they are doing. None of them. That's painful to hear, so who's going to listen?

Actually, Jesus says more than that and, in a way, it is even more painful to hear. More painful, but perhaps something we can hear because it opens a door to get past the horror of the crucifixion of the truth of God's love.

No, the truth is more painful than that because what Jesus actually says is, “**Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.**” The truth is that the *Embodied-Innocence-and-Love*, even as he is crucified, says not only the truth about us—we don't know what we are doing—but also the truth about God—that God wants the exact opposite of what we want when we feel under attack. He wants those who have attacked to be forgiven and be reconciled.

I believe that we have to take in *that* truth as best we can. We are human beings, and our pride and our fears are always going to get in our own way, but God's truth and reconciliation can gain traction in our lives only as we are humble enough to realize that we don't have the truth when we shout for someone's crucifixion.

I am going to risk stepping on toes because I don't know of a single herd in our country that hasn't had members show a hesitation to admit the whole truth because it is too hard to admit, that refuses to face some facts and listen to some reason, even when relationships can be repaired and sometimes lives can be saved.

- How hard is it for some to accept ownership in a problem when they can so easily assign blame to others?
- How hard is it for some whose identity is shame-based to accept credit from others when they so easily see their own faults?



- How hard is it for some in the *Black Lives Matter* movement to accept that the damage done to public and police property in Portland, Minneapolis and Chicago was massive, in the tens of millions of dollars?
- How hard has it been for some in the “Stop the Steal” movement to accept that there has never been any credible evidence that there was voter fraud, and five people died at the capital and over 100 police officers were injured because of unfounded and unproven claims?
- How hard is it for some to accept that we do not know yet if the shooter in Atlanta specifically targeted Asians in the horrific shooting spree at three massage parlors, that we have to wait for the evidence?
- How hard is it to accept that regardless of the shooter’s motive, that words do matter, that hate crimes against people of Asian descent have increased this year, and that the killing of eight Asians only magnifies that community’s sense of being increasingly targeted and under threat?
- How hard is it for those who decided that wearing masks is an infringement on their rights to believe that the pandemic would have been far less severe if masks had been worn when first encouraged?
- How hard will it be for some to trust being in crowds mask-less when it becomes clear that the virus, like other viruses, can be minimalized but perhaps never eliminated?

I could keep going because it is easy to come up with a long list of examples that cut every which way, but I bet I have already hit a nerve. I hope you know I’ve tried to include my own blind spots in those examples... but, being human, I know I’m still missing it.

My point is that to some degree our passage from John’s Gospel is about all of us. We are all to some degree members of herds with some kind of group-think going on where we sometimes cannot see the truth even when it is standing in front of us, battered and bruised because of our certainty and sense of self-righteousness.

Maybe what we can see, though, is that we can at least do better by trying to be about the work of forgiveness and reconciliation that Jesus calls for from the cross. You see, we don’t have to know the whole truth to begin being the imperfect body of Christ that works for reconciliation.

The place to begin is not learning the whole truth and then convincing the world. The place to begin is in humility, knowing that we do not have the whole truth, and that some of the damage to God’s *Embodied-Innocence-and-Love* is partly our own doing.

Beginning with that humility, maybe little by little we can hear a bit more of what we need to hear but did not want to believe, to see what we did not want to see—the truth about ourselves and about others that we would rather cancel.



I want to go back to Dr. Yasmin, the doctor-turned-medical-investigator who said that lies travel faster than facts, and [that it is harder to believe the truth than surrender a lie that you already believe](#). She was asked, [“Well, what could be done?”](#) I loved the answer that she gave because what she said is in keeping with others I have studied who I think are really smart about the way we human beings are wired.

After saying that snark, sarcasm, and shame don’t work—

that all those mocking and shaming social media posts that are supposed to wake up the world have almost no real positive affect

and more often make things worse—

Dr. Yasmin said that what her experience with those who buy into medical myths has taught her is this:

What actually can work is what we find hard to do but what needs to be done. The only thing that works is deep, empathetic, engagement with those who need to be heard even when they are wrong.

If someone we love has completely bought into a medical lie—and of course, I would expand that to be any lie that has become someone’s *doctrine*—it is only on the basis of a relationship that can they move. Only on the basis of the kind of love that Jesus showed can someone begin to trust someone enough to actually move away from the herd that wants them believing the lie in the first place.

And let’s remember, the same must be said of us and our lies. We need others to break through to us when we have joined the stampede and have accepted as doctrine something that really isn’t the whole truth and might even be wrong. We won’t get anywhere unless we remain in relationship with those who can help us hear and see what we do not want to hear and see.

The message of the Gospel that tells of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion—the message of the season of Lent—is that we won’t get anywhere until we realize that we also stand in the shadow of the cross, that we have a part in God’s *Embodied-Innocence-and-Love* being abused, and that our path to salvation begins in our own forgiveness and redirection.

The more important question for us to answer if we want to hear any of the answer to the question [“What is truth?”](#) is, [“Were you there when they crucified our Lord?”](#) To answer that question honestly is not to be shamed. It is to be liberated.

