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“Stretch the Truth”

John 18:33-37

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33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 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?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom does not belong to 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 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.”

While putting the last dishes on the table for the Thanksgiving meal, a dad yelled out, “Come on! Dinner is ready!” A young boy slowly rolls off the couch, trudges to the dining room to take his place at the table. Looking around at all the yummy, cheesy, butter-laced goodness that was spread before him, he closed his eyes and bowed his head, and prayed: “Lord, stretch me!”

“Lord, stretch me” is a fitting prayer, especially as we celebrate Thanksgiving this week; not only to prepare our stomachs, but also to prepare our hearts and minds. Thanksgiving is a time of reflection; I hope it provides a time to pause, to look back and look forward, as we sit in the



present moment of now. And it is in that space, the space between what was and what will be, a liminal space, where we might come to find new understanding.

The word liminal comes from the Latin root which means “threshold.” Liminal space is a “threshold” space between two things, a “crossing over” space where one thing has been left behind, but you are not yet fully in something else. Life can be viewed as a string of liminal moments. Yet, oftentimes, we move too quickly through life to sit in that present tension as we are betwixt and between past and future.

A simple example of this “liminal space” is that time in the early morning when you are floating in and out of sleep. While sound asleep there seems to be no boundaries between time and space, as it all swirls together. Then you begin bouncing between the summons of two worlds, vacillating between the boundary-free dream world and the real world of form and structure. You know that feeling when you are not quite sure where you are and what is real and what is imagined. Perhaps the buzz of your alarm makes a cameo in your dream, as your mind tries to make sense of its senses. And then your alarm ushers you back into the three-dimensional reality of the physical world around you.¹

(And some of us like that feeling so much we hit “snooze” and do it all over again).

But liminal space is not limited to short-term thresholds. Those thresholds become liminal space when for whatever reason you feel caught, drawn in, and liminal space can exist for much longer periods of time. We usually experience liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed, whether through good or not-so-good circumstances—it could be due to the birth of a child or the death of a loved one, when we get married or divorced, at a job lose or major relocation. Liminal space is often uncomfortable and unsettling, which is why most of us seek to avoid it, but it can also be a period filled with grace.²

Liminal space, whether as an inner state or an outer situation, provides an opportunity to think and act in new ways. And it is in this transition, this liminal space, where you might pray: “Lord, stretch me.”

I believe this is where we find Pontius Pilate. When I read this passage, I see an image of Pilate literally at a physical threshold, standing at the door of the palace between Jesus inside and the crowd outside. In this space, in this threshold space, he is caught between two truths. On one hand, he is the Roman governor, a man tasked with maintaining order, confronted by a mob who wants a “criminal” to be put to death. On the other hand, he is confronted by Jesus, a prisoner who

¹ Alan Seale in his blog post “The Liminal Space – Embracing the Mystery and Power of Transition from What Has Been to What Will Be”

² Richard Rohr in his Daily Meditation “Transitions: Holy Transitions” <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/holy-transitions-2023-05-03/>



he might think is innocent, and who's meek demeanor challenges his own understanding of power and authority and of kingship.

Now caught in the liminal space between political pressure and existential questioning, Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate wanted to find out if Jesus was in fact a king, by his own understanding of the word, and if he posed a political threat to Rome. Jesus begins to stretch Pilate a bit: "Are you asking because you yourself are curious or are you simply seeking to justify the charges brought against me?" But since Jesus' own people brought him to Pilate, he needed to know the charges: "What have you done?"

Pilate is seeking clarity—the truth—but Jesus' response continues to stretch him further than he is prepared to wrestle with: "My kingdom does not belong to this world—I have come into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate is confronted, confused, and caught. He doesn't understand what type of king Jesus is. He doesn't know how to reconcile the demands of the crowd with the unsettling nature of the man standing before him who claims he is some other-worldly king. And in this tension, in this liminal space, Pilate asks a question that echoes through history: "What is truth?" (John 18:38a)

In this liminal space, Pilate is caught by and wrestles with the cost of truth, a truth that might honestly stretch him too far. To Pilate, a king is a ruler, a mighty and firm force, a dictating authority who demands submission. But Jesus does not demand submission. Jesus came to serve. Pilate's views are being challenged; his truths are being stretched.

Jesus did not come to build walls to separate us from them. No, he ate with sinners and welcomed the stranger.

Jesus did not come with an army to claim power through military might. No, he commanded the sword be put back into the sheath.

Jesus did not come to abuse the power of the position, exploiting those under his rule. No, he emptied himself and washed the disciples' feet. Christ came "to love us and free us."

Like Pilate, we too find ourselves caught in similar spaces—moments when what we know to be true is being stretched. We can lean in and give ourselves permission to surrender to what is next. Or we can resist and ignore a deeper truth calling out to us.

This call of truth reminds me of Elphaba in the musical *Wicked*. Now, I must confess that I have not seen *Wicked*. But this connection was made in a pastor's group I meet with monthly as we discussed this passage in John (shoutout to Meg Vail). If you are not familiar with *Wicked*, it is a prequel to the original "The Wizard of Oz" told from the perspective of the unlikely friendship between Elphaba, a green-skinned witch, and Galinda, a popular and seemingly good witch. Elphaba and Galinda are both truth-seekers who journey to the Emerald City in hopes to have the



great wizard right some wrongs.³ The Wizard rules through fear and illusions, and when Elphaba discovers that the great wizard is a fraud behind the curtain who thrives on lies and manipulation to stay in power, she is faced with a choice: Go along with the lies for the sake of acceptance and comfort, or speak out and stand firm in the truth?

Elphaba chooses the truth, even though it costs her everything. Despite now being mislabeled as “wicked,” she realizes that she cannot wait for others to join her or approve of her. She must follow where the truth leads, even if it means standing alone. The truth becomes her power, and she now claims a new calling and purpose: to use her magic for good.

Like Pilate, Elphaba was at a threshold, caught between the lies of a corrupt system and the costly truth. Her choice to follow the truth, even when it isolates her, reminds us that truth often comes at a price.

Now, Elphaba is no Christ-figure, no savior, by any means, but in the face of the Wizard, who like the systems of power in Pilate’s world, cannot handle the truth, she made the decision to listen and follow the voice of truth.

As scary as it may be, we all need to consciously spend time at the thresholds of our lives. It is in these liminal moments of our lives, that real and authentic transformation can happen, where we allow ourselves to be stretched. If we give ourselves permission to let go of control, to live into the grace-filled moments of mystery, we are then open and empty to receive something genuine and new.

The church today exists in a liminal space. As we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, we are living in the “now and not yet” reality of Christ’s reign, between Christ’s birth, death, resurrection and ascension and Christ’s return. Christ is the one who is, and was, and who is to come. We are in a liminal space, waiting, with hopeful anticipation, for Christ to come again.

Revelation, used as our affirmation of faith, begins with the assurance that Jesus is “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Because Christ is the one who embodies the Truth and triumphs over false powers of the world, we are called to participate as faithful witnesses in truth-telling and truth-seeking, as well, and to testify to God’s truth, stretching that truth to the ends of the earth, as we continue to wait and pray “thy kingdom come.”

While we know God’s kingdom will come regardless because it is God’s after all, we are reminded that Christ has “made us to be kings.” And since we are made to be kings and queens, we

³ Put together using the “Plot: Summaries” page of IMDB for *Wicked: Part I*; <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1262426/plotsummary/>



have the power to stand up and bear witness to God's truth to a world that claims, much like those who condemned Jesus, "we have no king but the emperor!"

Beloved, the truth is both a gift and a calling. It is a gift in that Christ himself is the truth, a truth that stretches from eternity to eternity. It is also a calling in that we are invited to pause and listen to and follow the voice of truth.

As we find ourselves in the liminal moments of life, I wonder what truth God is calling you to live into and where you might pray, "Lord, stretch me?"

There is one thing I know to be true—Christ is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Alpha and the Omega, the Word of God made flesh, who dwelt among us and within full of grace and truth, the one who is, and was, and who is to come.

To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

