

Sermon for Good Friday Year C

**[RCL] Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42;
Psalm 22**

“What is truth?”

That famous question Pilate asks, stares us in the face every year on Good Friday. The fact that it seemingly is left unanswered remains a challenge to us. Jesus doesn't seem very interested in verbally defining truth. He says that He IS the way, and the truth, and the life, and Jesus says that he came into the world to testify to the truth, and that those who belong to the truth listen to him, but he never gives a philosophical definition of the truth.

Jesus seems less interested in defining the truth and much more interested in showing us the truth. He's interested in having us see the truth as a living thing, and to see ourselves as belonging to it, as being a part of it. But being human means we have multiple truth claims weighing on us. The truth of the world, the way it is, and the truth of God's realm—the way God dreams the world to be, the way we believe it can be. Those multiple claims are at the crux of Pilate's question, “What is truth?” or maybe which truth do you mean?

But Jesus doesn't respond in words to Pilate's question. Instead he reveals the answer with his life, death, and resurrection. The Passion reveals a deep truth about the way the world is. Not the world that God created and pronounced good... but the world that we have created. The world we have made out of fear. Out of shame. Out of bitterness. Out of our desperate need to hide our own tender wounds. In our desperation and fear, we try to make it someone else's fault; we cast blame and cry out for the blood of someone else, an innocent, over and over and over. The Passion reveals the worst in us. Reveals the truth of the hideous things we're capable of when we're afraid. When we're ashamed.

Of course it also reveals an even deeper truth about who God is and how God responds to our shame and fear. The truth that Jesus shows with his life and ministry is a profound challenge to the world we have made. The truth that Jesus shows us is that no matter how benign and beneficial we might think our human systems and structures are; they are all fallen. We are all fallen. Our world is infected with injustice. Jesus demonstrated with his life, with his teachings, and with his death the truth about this infectious injustice, and the human cost that is always required for maintaining unjust structures of power. All through his life and his death he shows us God's loud “NO” to the dominant systems of this world, and God's louder “YES” to way of hope, peace, and justice.

These are truths that we can see with the help of the cross, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Pilate has a chance to see these truths as well. He is the local representative of the dominant system after all, and in this conversation with Jesus he has a chance to hear and see and be transformed, but Pilate can only see the world in terms of earthly kings, and he so turns away from the revelation of the Truth standing before him. Once the crowd reasserts their commitment to the status quo, loudly affirming that they have no king but Caesar, Pilate turns away and goes

back to business as usual. And once Jesus is nailed to the cross the crowd, no longer interested in the spectacle, also turns away and goes back to business as usual.

All four of the Gospel accounts of these events have significant, subtle differences. In John's version there are no earthquakes, no darkness covering the earth, no temple curtains being torn in two. In John, Jesus simply dies on a cross, and is put in a tomb. The empire doesn't strike back so much as it just continues. People return to their lives of luxury or labor. The status quo remains the status quo – unabated and unchallenged.

How often do we catch a glimpse of this life-giving, world-altering truth and then go back to business as usual? How tempting is it for us to turn away? To not look at or accept this truth. The truth that we are capable of this horror... that the Passion takes place because of the world we have made, the world we are content to live in every day. We are constantly at risk of turning away – turning away from the cross of Christ, and turning away from all the crucified people of every generation – and returning to the status quo. It's so very easy to close our eyes, to change the channel, turn the page, walk away telling ourselves that the reality, the truth, of the cross doesn't really have anything to do with us. "What is truth?" But in hiding from or averting our eyes from that truth, we risk missing an opportunity for transformation that God is always holding out for us.

The first act in repentance, the first move toward redemption, the first stance of transformation is simply to not turn away. To not close our eyes to the suffering of others. Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino calls this "the primordial demand." "To let ourselves be affected," he writes, "to feel pain over lives cut short or endangered, to feel indignation over the injustice behind the tragedy, to feel shame over the way we have ruined this planet, that we have not undone the damage and are not planning to do so, all this is important," he says, because it spurs us into helpful action. But even more importantly he says, "It roots us firmly in the truth and forces us to overcome the unreality in which we live."¹ It roots us firmly in the Truth, the truth revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The truth that God's dream is greater than the world's nightmare. The truth that God's "yes" is deeper and more profound than the empire's "no." It is when we face reality—when we face the truth—when we bear witness to the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of all the crucified people around the world—that is when salvation and redemption begins.

It cannot be a coincidence that the first people who see Jesus on Sunday morning are the same ones who refuse to look away from his death on Friday; those who watch through the whole bloody execution, who accompany his body to the tomb, and who come again to prepare his lifeless corpse for burial; they are the ones who are the first to experience the truth of the resurrection. The truth of Jesus' life. The truth of God's "yes."

What is truth? The cross reveals the truth. The truth of the pain and suffering that continues to exist in the world because of the inhuman demands of our unjust systems and structures. But also the truth that for those who are willing to join themselves to a community that continues to look on the cross and strives to stand in solidarity with those who are hurting, who are marginalized,

¹ Sobrino, John. *Where Is God?: Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*. Orbis Books.

who are still being sacrificed – crucified – every day, the cross also opens up the way of transformation and salvation. May we be given the strength to never turn away from the cross, and to live more fully into the truth, the way and the life as revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Written by The Reverend Richard Burden, PhD

The Rev. Dr. Richard Burden was called as Rector of All Saints Parish in 2014. Born and raised in Colorado, Richard received a BA in Theatre Arts from Colorado State University, an MA in history from the University of Colorado at Denver and a PhD from the University of Chicago, where he studied Christian conversion in early 20th century China. He began his first career as a bookseller working at the Tattered Cover in Denver, and after a journey through academia he discerned a call to ordained ministry which led him to the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, in Berkeley, CA. Richard was ordained in 2009 and was first called to the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington to serve as Priest in Charge, and also to help develop a groundbreaking program of leadership and congregational development known as The Network for Pastoral Leadership. In 2013, he began to sense God calling him in a new direction, this time to New England. He is a Fellow of the Beatitudes Society. He says, “I went into ordained ministry because I wanted to be a catalyst for individuals and communities to become the people that God needs them to be and to do the work God so urgently needs them to do.” With his spouse Monica he is also a parent to two school aged children. His recorded sermons are available at allsaintsbrookline.org, you can contact him through the All Saints Brookline Facebook page, twitter @allsaintsbline, and instagram.

Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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