

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
November 21, 2021
Christ the King Sunday
Thanksgiving Sunday
John 18:33-38

In this season of Thanksgiving, dear Lord, we have so much for which to be thankful: friends, families, love that surrounds us, for life itself, and for you. We have been so richly blessed in so many ways. Now, in this time together, may we hear your voice, listen to your truth, and have the courage and faith to live by them. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

“By Many Names”

I want you to know that I did not come down with a case of amnesia and forget what holiday it is this week. I know Thanksgiving is Thursday and that this isn't Holy Week, even though our reading from John's gospel is a Holy Week story. Trust me, I'm quite certain it's a 21 pound turkey in my refrigerator and not a 21 pound ham for Easter.

Some of you may know that this is the last Sunday of the church year which, since 1925, has been referred to as Christ the King Sunday. Or, to use the more politically correct term, “reign of Christ Sunday”. More on that later.

It was the Roman Catholic Church that started the celebration, and since the 1970s it's been observed by Christians in general, though I don't remember any such observance in my church growing up. For plenty of years I've ignored Christ the King in favor of preaching Thanksgiving. But I think the two hold some things in common, so today we're going to look at Thanksgiving through the lens of Reign of Christ Sunday.

Think of Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday as the New Year's Eve of the Christian year, the day we come full circle and end a journey that began last year on the first Sunday of Advent. Like New Year's Eve, it's a celebration that looks forward to a new beginning while looking back to the

previous year, remembering everything we've learned about Christ and his mission and ministry and what he calls us to do.

Now, I'll be honest that the whole idea of Christ as King seems a bit odd to me. This is because generally kings are not known as people who – well -- were very Christian. History is filled with bloodthirsty, narcissistic kings. Henry VIII anyone? George III? And Biblical kings fair no better. King Herod killed all male babies under the age of two. And the other King Herod ordered the execution of John the Baptist and washed his hands of Jesus' fate.

Which is why many people have stopped referring to this Sunday as Christ the King Sunday and instead call it "The Reign of Christ Sunday", because Jesus doesn't seem to have much in common with earthly kings.

In her book "Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right", Carter Heyward replaces the word "kingdom" with "kin-dom". *Kin-dom*. She thinks it's a much more appropriate term for Christ because it implies mutuality and respect. Whereas king, or kingdom carries too much baggage and is outdated in this democratic age. Kin-dom allows us to speak of faith in relational ways and embodies the truth of Jesus' message.

Which gets us to the gospel according to John.

In this scene Jesus and Pilate are going back and forth about the charges brought against Jesus. Pilate really doesn't want to be there dealing with someone he perceives to be a troublemaker. And he definitely doesn't want to be in the middle of a dispute between the religious leaders and Jesus. Pilate, who's been charged with maintaining Roman rule, doesn't think Jesus is a threat to Rome and he tells the religious leaders to "judge him according to your own law" (verse 29 and 31). But Pilate also wants to stay in control, and if he can't handle matters in Jerusalem it probably won't sit well in Rome.

So Pilate summons Jesus and asks him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Now) The title "king" is loaded with political meaning for the Romans. If

Jesus claims to be king, he's owning up to being an insurrectionist. And the Roman government has little patience for rebels and even less tolerance for any king but Caesar.

But in typical fashion, Jesus replies to Pilate's question with a question of his own: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" But Jesus' indirect answer doesn't satisfy Pilate. Pilate, an aspiring politician, wants an explicit answer so that any decision he makes in that courtroom is above reproach. So he seeks an answer another way: "I am not a Jew, am I? (Pilate replies.) Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

At this point, Jesus speaks his truth. "My kingdom is not from this world." Pilate then asks him again. "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am 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."

To which Pilate asks, "What is truth?"

TRUTH is a major theme of John's gospel, and truth is a major theme in our day and age. It has become a cliché to say we live in a "post-truth" era. We don't have to dig deep to find the headlines that affirm this grim reality. Whether we're talking about politics, climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, or critical race theory, a quick Google search will yield zingers like, "The Death of Truth," "The Assault on Truth," "Notes on Falsehood," and "Our Post-Truth World." We are steeped in a culture of blatant lies, sly exaggerations, doctored images, wild conspiracy theories, and propaganda parading as news. Objective facts, for all intents and purposes, no longer exist or matter. The true is false, the false is true, and anything can mean anything. What is truth, we ask?

What is truth? Pilate asks. We have no way of knowing if Pilate's question was sincere or sarcastic; personally, I think you can read it either way. But no matter if it was sincere or sarcastic, it was wrongly put, because Pilate thinks of truth as a "what". For Pilate, whatever else truth was or was not, it was something you thought, a concept one grasped and could verify.

Truth for Pilate, and for us, was and is a function of the intellect; a proposition, a concept, a calculation.

But this is not Jesus' understanding of truth or John's understanding of truth. Jesus does not teach the truth to his disciples. Truth is not an object, a body of materials that one possesses. Jesus does not deliver the truth to his disciples, nor do the disciples have the truth.

What Jesus does do is give himself to the disciples, because in John's gospel, truth is a "who" not a "what". Jesus is the truth. You want to know what truth is, look at Jesus. Truth isn't an instrument, a weapon, or a slogan we can smack on a refrigerator magnet. The truth is Jesus: The life of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the love of Jesus. He himself is truth's most complete and complex embodiment.

This means that truth is not something we try to intellectually grasp, it's someone we follow. Truth is embodied in the person of Jesus; truth is Jesus' life and mission, and it's carried out in the actions of his followers. It's lived out in the greatest commandment, to love one another. Truth is a matter of wanting to do God's will, not a matter of trying to decide if what Jesus teaches is true. There's great irony in this scene where Pilate asks Jesus what is truth, when the one who is truth incarnate is staring him in the face.

In Jesus' life, we learn what truth looks like and as faithful Christians we strive to live like him and embody that truth in our daily lives.

Which gets me to Thanksgiving, because I think Thanksgiving and our observance of Reign of Christ Sunday have something in common. Because Thanksgiving is not just a day, it's a way of life-it's what we do when we embody Jesus' truth in our lives. John F. Kennedy said, "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them." Someone else once said, "Thanksgiving, after all, is a word of action."

As our doxology this morning we'll sing "Now Thank We All Our God". It was written amid the darkness of the Thirty Years' War by German pastor

Martin Rinkart, who is said to have buried 5000 of his parishioners in one year. His parish was ravaged by war, death, and economic disaster. In the midst of that darkness, he sat down to write a table grace for his children: *Now thank we all our God/with hearts and hands and voices/who wondrous things hath done/in whom His world rejoices/who from our mother's arms/hath blessed us on our way/with countless gifts of love/and still is ours today.*

Here was a man who knew thanksgiving comes from love of God, not from outward circumstances. Who knew real gratitude, profound gratitude, does not depend on what we possess or how good our lives are at any given moment. Gratitude is about recognizing God's grace and love and presence – God's truth – and then embodying that truth in our lives.

On the last day of his earthly life, Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate for questioning. "I came into the world to testify to the truth," he said. To which Pilate asked, "What is truth?"

What is truth? He could have said, God, the Holy One of Israel, is the Truth. The Ten Commandments are the Truth. Jesus could have launched into a philosophic defense of monotheism in contrast to Roman polytheism. His silence at that critical moment is not a lost opportunity, though. It is a very significant silence, a modest silence in the face of the most important question any one of us ever asks; a holy, reverent silence.

Christians believe that truth is not an idea in the mind, a philosophy or theology; it is not a creed, a liturgy, a book or a church.

Christians believe truth is Jesus. He was, we believe, the perfect expression of the mystery and reality of God, and he taught that every human being is loved by God, the object of God's mercy and generosity and grace; every human being—*every human being*—is created in God's image and loved with an everlasting love.

And when he, whom we regard as Truth with a capital "T" was asked, "What is, finally, the essence of it all? What does the God and Creator of us

all finally want of us?" he said simply, "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

That is all you need. It's the only truth you need. So as you celebrate Thanksgiving this week, remember that it is not just a day, it's a way of life- it's what we do when we follow Christ the King.

John Wesley was once asked what one person could do on behalf of the kingdom of God. He answered:

Do all the good you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

May it always be so.

Amen.

Sources:

John Buchanan, "Truth", November 15, 2009

Debie Thomas, "What is Truth", November 14, 2021

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, commentaries on John 18:33-37