

John 16:12-15

John 18:28-38

MEDITATION IN PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP

When Jesus is asked who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he reaches into the crowd and pulls out a child with a cheek full of bubble gum and eyes full of whatever a child's eyes are full of, and says unless you can become like that, don't bother to ask.

Frederick Buechner in "Telling the Truth"

"The whole truth and nothing but the truth" is the gold standard in our court system today. We strive for truth, in great hope that justice will be accomplished, and the accused will be given a fair trial; and the community can then resume living in harmony.

In the John 16 passage, Jesus is looking toward his own accusers waiting for him in Jerusalem. He is on his way with his disciples to celebrate the Passover, knowing that the high priests Annas and Caiaphas and other religious leaders are looking for him and intend to have him killed under Roman law. The Jewish community has been guided by God's law ever since Moses brought the Ten Commandments to them more than 1,300 years ago, and over the centuries the Law has been their guide to the truth. However, in the long span of time since Moses walked in the wilderness with his people, priests and other religious leaders have become very powerful in the society, and, striving to maintain this position, they impose their authority.

When the Romans conquer Jerusalem in 63 B.C., they bring in their mighty forces, their false gods and a completely different way of life. They speak Latin, and Greek among the Jews. They are concerned with their own physical beauty, intelligence, philosophies, and cunning; and they brutally claim Judea and its people as possessions, gained by their own power and might. Tiberius Caesar, the emperor, proclaims he is a god.

Caesar views the seven million Jews living in Judea as a lucrative tax base and orders his recently-appointed governor, Pontius Pilate, to keep peace among them so as not to disturb the flow of income to his palace.

Pilate had been a Praetorian Guard in Rome, a man of the middle class who distinguished himself and was noticed by his commander, Sejanus, who recommended him to Caesar for the governorship.

Pilate is elated for this new opportunity to rise into the upper class of power despite it being a low rung on the ladder; and he tries his best to manage the political pressure of pleasing Caesar while practicing careful diplomacy with the Jews.

He has found them to be intelligent, faithful, industrious, yet unbending when it comes to their worship of Yahweh and following his commandments.

Pilate was raised to believe in the gods of his culture, but he had abandoned them long ago. He does not believe a flawed man like Tiberius is a god, but he keeps his opinions to himself in favor of keeping his favor with Tiberius intact, and his life safe. The emperor can be vicious and cruel and has amassed many enemies. Pilate wants no part of Tiberius' paranoid behavior to be aimed toward him.

Tiberius rules from Rome, and because Judea is so remote, Pilate is his own counselor; yet Tiberius learns of all that is happening by way of his informants who may or may not tell him the truth, depending on their own agendas. His main informant is Herod Antipas, who is a good politician, but also a spy who bends the truth to suit his own ambitions; but a life motivated by blind ambition often ends in destruction.

Pilate is thus enmeshed in an invisible political storm of all these leaders--as well as the angry crowd that gathers the day of the trial, goaded to near-rebellion by the religious leaders. His allegiance to Caesar and trust or mistrust of those around him rules his ultimate survival. Pilate is a newcomer and an underling in this web of power, deceit, and self-preservation, and he becomes the pawn during the trial of Jesus.

Pilate, being non-religious, has nothing against Jesus. He had heard of him through his wife, Procula, who is open to the Jews and their beliefs. Women in Roman culture were granted rights like no other culture during this time, and she has open discussions with her husband. Before the trial he had heard of him and regarded him as a curiosity, with questions to himself - Who is this man Jesus, who is receiving so much attention as he enters Jerusalem?

Jesus appears before Pilate; and as Pilate regards Jesus, an immediate and indelible impression is made.

Pilate gazes at an ordinary, rather tall Jewish man, with clean yet rustic clothes, who returns his gaze with intelligence and a steady, penetrating gaze that exudes maturity and a contained sense of self-- and pure innocence. Pilate is puzzled how this man could be branded a traitor, condemned to die by his own people, and still remain stoic. Jesus refuses to defend himself although Pilate encourages him to speak. He invites him into his chambers, away from the maddening crowd, in order to persuade him to help himself by testifying. Jesus'

eyes show serenity touched with sadness; but he does not seem frantic or eager to exonerate himself. Jesus has no other agenda; he tells the simple truth: he is the Messiah, sent by God, to testify to the truth. Completely frustrated by this unusual and innocent man before him, Pilate responds by asking, "What is Truth?"

I have always wondered: how did Pilate pose this enigmatic question to Jesus?

Sarcastically, revealing his cynicism toward the whole traitorous mess of which he has become a part and in which he is now forever trapped?

Honestly, as an adult, who hopes for a good definition on which he can rely? or

Innocently, as a child, whose eyes are filled with curiosity and wonder at the potential of knowing the truth of living a life unbound,

- free of greed and lust for power

- free of deceit and intrigue,

-free of danger and fear for his life,

a simple life, filled with trust of friend and neighbor and the truth that Jesus has already revealed to all who will listen, and accept?

Pilate is drowning, mired in the corruption and ill-will of his twisted culture. If only he had been able to observe Jesus and his disciples during their ministry, to witness the truth of this man of integrity and peace! Accepting the truth right then and there may have been tempting, but did he have time to hear it? Of course not! The crowd waits outside and they are growing louder and more insistent. They want to see Jesus, but not to hear him and be enlightened by him! A loveless world is a sightless world.

It is not the time for Caiaphas, the religious leaders, Pilate, or the crowd to hear the truth from Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaims one true God, grace upon grace, and love over hate. By the end of the trial, Pilate has declared Jesus to be innocent three times.

When Pilate first met Jesus on the day of his arrest, he would have needed to experience an epiphany similar to Paul's to receive an instant and dramatic revelation of Jesus' identity. And even if this conversation now with Jesus disturbs his thoughts, his heart, and his intellect, a revelation from God is not

God's intention, for Pilate would be the man God had chosen to fulfill his plan for the redemption of humankind.

Frederick Buechner tells a story of meeting Maya Angelou, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author:

Maya Angelou is a large woman about my height, black, beautiful, and so full of energy you can warm your hands in front of her. She was born in the South and brought up in great poverty by her grandmother in the little town of Stamps, Arkansas. Awful things happened to her. She was raped at the age of eight, not a violent rape but a sort of one-thing-leads-to-another rape by a boyfriend of her mother whom she'd gone to visit. She came back from that experience afraid to tell anybody about it, but she eventually told her little brother Bailey that his thing had happened. By a fluke, within a couple of days of that, word came that the man who'd raped her had died, and she was terrified that her words had killed him. So she was mute for five years - didn't say anything for five years. Well, she grew up, became a dancer, became a waitress, became a cook, and for a brief time she was a prostitute. She fell on evil times - the man whom she was with at that time said he needed some money and, if she wouldn't mind, could she entertain some of his friends, and she did that for a time. Then she started to write and one thing led to another - acclaimed books, operas, films, and TV shows. She's a Renaissance woman, in other words. Full of life, full of beans, full of stories. And I just want to tell you something she said that moved me.

She said that every once in a while as she moved around the world she would meet somebody who would say with considerable pride, "I'm a Christian." And whenever she heard that she would say, "I try very hard to be a Christian. It's very difficult for me to be a Christian. I work at it. A lot of things are working against it in me, though." But what she was really thinking when she would hear someone say, "I'm a Christian," is, "Already?"

It's a good thing to remember. Already a Christian. . . Wow.

What would Jesus see in your eyes? Fear? Doubt, Despair? Innocence? Guilt? Pain? Confusion? Wonder? Love? Acceptance?

The Holy Spirit acknowledges it all, and responds with pure love and mercy. Nothing is impossible with God.

The greatest truth of all is this - and it is the whole truth and nothing but the truth: God is creating continually to save, redeem, renew, and restore everything and everyone in his creation.

Pilate's question, "What is Truth?" can be seen as his Turning Point -- a confession, that he, after all, is powerless. It is a complex question, meant to be enigmatic, with many facets to ponder and many factors to consider; and it is posed to all of us.

How do we come to understand the truth about God, human beings, and the world?

If we want to know what God is like - look to Christ.

If we want to know what real humanity is and how we can live a genuinely human life -- look to Christ.

If we want to know what God is doing in the world and in our individual lives - look to Christ.

In doing this we will leave our preconceived opinions aside while we study the Bible and measure our thoughts and actions with the words and actions of Jesus Christ. We will learn from scripture itself that the whole world is God's world and that there is no place where God is not at work creating, reconciling and renewing— even among people who do not know or believe in God. We will also listen to and be open to learn from the natural sciences, psychology, political science, secular novels and plays, and even other religions; and as we listen, we remain wide open for the insights to other points of view. Yet, everything we do must be done with reference to the truth that is *in Christ Jesus* about God, about ourselves, and about the world.

Jesus beckons, even pleads, Come to me, all you who carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Come to me as little children, with your mouths full of bubble gum and your eyes full of whatever a child's eyes are full of . . .

At the end of her life, Maya Angelou gave us the following words, her most salient beliefs:

"There are people who go through life burdened by ignorance because they refuse to see. When they do not recognize the truth that they belong to their community and their community belongs to them . . . it is because they refuse to see. . . It is

my heart's desire to be a blessing. My life depends on it."

Let us pray:

Lord God, your love for us astounds us, wraps us in your arms and sustains us, that we are not lost when in your presence and care. Hold us, and teach us to be a blessing, by your Holy Spirit of truth. Amen.