

What is Truth?

John 18:28-40

By: Marietta Macy

(A few measures of Darth Vader's theme from Star Wars played by Dianne Sprunger and Ted Sharpe start the sermon.)

Thanks to Dianne and Ted for helping set the right vibe as we encounter the evil of empire in today's scripture. Too often when we encounter empire in the right light, in our daily lives for example, living in a modern one, we find it easy to write it off as just a few small negatives, that some of these tragedies are just the price we pay for having the security we do. That surely the good we can do with our control over other people's lives is going to benefit everyone and if it doesn't it's their own fault for not fitting in or complying with the system anyway. It's only when we see empire framed as what it truly is, in Star Wars for example, that we are able to recognize and name the full extent of its evil. We've done that with this narrative from scripture for thousands of years now and it's time that we take a step back and see this all for what it is too.

If even just for today, for an intellectual/spiritual exercise, let's set aside the idea that God needed Jesus to die to forgive our sins so we can lean into the humanness of the dynamics at play here and the very real consequences of these ideas. We lose so much when we fall into the trap of accepting a theology forged in the fires of empirical rule, instead of digging into who Jesus really was and what it meant for him to be a very real human person, living a very real, human life under brutal Roman occupation. As modern Christians we cannot discount these centuries of history that have molded the version and legacy of Christianity we have inherited today.

Regardless of your personal theology we cannot ignore that this passage specifically and other gospels telling this part of the crucifixion story have been used to justify the genocide and persecution of Jewish people for literally thousands of years. This alone should give us pause when we come to this part of the gospel. We cannot claim to follow a fully human, fully divine Palestinian Jewish man living under Roman occupation without taking into account the human, secular even, consequences of us recklessly bleeding our sacrificial theology all over our neighbors for the benefit of the empire.

The narrative we inherited willingly or not that the "the Jews" killed Jesus should be seen as the heresy it is in the Christian church of today and if that unravels our theology then those beliefs needed to go anyway. Like our own internalized white supremacy, we've absorbed this idea from the culture of Christian Nationalism we were born into and it's our job to recognize it so we can we can repent of and recant any trace of that antisemitic notion left in us.

We do a disservice to ourselves and the church when we neglect the impact of how much power any interpretation of the Gospel lost when it became the religion of the empire. When the empire adopts religion, empire cannot be the bad guy in the narrative. So in our passage from today, it cannot be Rome's fault that Jesus was crucified when Constantine, ya know, a ROMAN

EMPEROR, made Christianity the religion of the whole empire. There had to be an escape hatch in the biblical interpretation and written record of this story. Our options in John are “the Jews”- a minority that the dominate culture can benefit from by oppressing, a people group of which Jesus himself was a part and Pilate- an educated, poetic governor who probably got his job by working very hard and being so deserving, he’s wise and discerning, asking Jesus cryptic questions, but he can be strong and decisive too... somebody we’d probably vote for... somebody the Roman Empire was still going to appoint to rule over you and you needed to respect enough to obey if they were to maintain their regional monolith of control. Christians who had been practicing in secret out of necessity, who had been tortured and martyred, became safe by the terms of the empire all of a sudden and they were so quick to point their fingers at the Jewish people for their collective benefit and to strengthen their new allegiance with power. The problem is, empire and Jesus are not compatible, empire and Judaism are not compatible which is what got Jesus his death sentence, and empire and Christianity are not compatible which has been our downfall for a couple thousands years now.

But unfortunately we’re still doing it today. So many of these human systems we design to give us power, to give us a false sense of safety, and superiority all depend on someone being less than, on someone being inferior, subhuman, and not as worthy of love and compassion as you and your people surely are. This bond with power that depends on the subjugation of another is only as strong as a friendship built entirely on gossip and dislike of the same person in the office or on the playground. It might make you feel strong in the moment, but they’re not going to be the friend you depend on when the chips are really down.

Yes, the establishment, leadership Jews- Ananas, Caiaphas, and friends, turned Jesus over to the Romans as a nullifying sacrifice- he was troubling both the empire and their own precarious power as occupied people and their religious stability within the Jewish community- so love of power and love of power found each other within the dominate and oppressed groups and made Jesus their blood sacrifice. Not on the alter of God, but in spite of it, in spite of all Jesus was sent to teach as a Jewish leader and as our Messiah. When God becomes human, humans will crucify her every time. Because the true notions of divinity and humanity’s need for control and exclusion are incompatible. They will destroy each other every time in the moment; thank God resurrection teaches us that the Creator will have the last word though, try as we might to win this power struggle with the Divine.

“What is truth?” Pilate asks Jesus. Depends on who you’re asking and who’s truth you think matters. Are you hoping to be sated by the myths empire passes off as truth for it’s own benefit? Or do you want that Jesus truth? The kind that’ll get you into good trouble for sure because it’s not compatible with the lies humans like to tell ourselves. Do you want the empire truth that builds walls to control and carve up land and people? Or that God truth that every time will turn those walls sideways so they become bridges?

What we see play out here with Jesus regardless of his divinity is an example of the layered, simmering violence that was always about to erupt (and is always about to erupt) when people live under the rule of a prejudice, greedy, oppressive state without full freedom and autonomy the way God intends for all people. This is part of what makes Jesus’ humanness so special: that he wasn’t. Even when God comes to earth in human form, they are still ground into the dirt

under the heel of empire and human greed. Not-special Jesus is sentenced to death by crucifixion, one of thousands possibly millions that the Roman Empire alone killed. When a system of power chooses to enforce false peace through violent means, there is no escaping it other than to bring down the whole system.

This is where Jesus IS special. Where God breaking through our brutal, human evil to resurrect themselves is revolutionary. It's the Holy One saying there is another way to do things. There IS another way to all live together. Where everyone can live in abundance, with their needs met, with the freedom and means to explore the beauty of creation, their passions and interests. Jesus is teaching us, among other things, that there was a life before kings and empires and presidents, wars, prisons, and walls, and there will be a life after... if we chose to believe the truth of it. If we live like we actually believe that God can resurrect Jesus, we will collectively be able to resurrect a new world from this daily Holy week era of history it feels like we're living in. Not because I think we're such amazing stuff (though y'all are), but because that's the way God means for things to be in the first place.

Our holy Mother does not want us waking up everyday to news of fresh horror somewhere in the world, she doesn't want us to run ourselves ragged staying informed and fighting for one cause after another... because if we let God have her way with the world there just wouldn't even be a need for any of it. Never a need for another prayer vigil for victims of war or police violence, for a school shooting or "natural" disaster. For thousands of years humans have insisted that we know better, our version of power is better, our systems of value, knowledge, and control are better than God's. I don't think it's too radical to say, after taking a look around at the carnage of the last several years, that's not really working.

"What is truth?" Pilate asks Jesus. Well do you want the empire's truth or God's truth? Do you want the truth of the oppressor or the oppressed? Do you want the truth that will be quick and easy like fast food, but leave you empty and unnourished? Or do you want that God kind of truth that requires you to be fully present and involved, to do the work of tilling the ground, rejoicing in slow growth, offering care, then realizing not only are you filled and nourished but you were able to freely offer that to your neighbors as well?

What is truth? Depends on who you're asking and whose truth you value. If we want the truth that a Brown skinned, Palestinian, Jewish rabbi living under Roman occupation had to offer, we're going to have to be brave enough to imagine a new world and recognize empire for the lie that it is. God's already shown us it's possible, God shows us it's possible every day when the sun comes up again, but we have to stop fighting against God's truth with the myth that there is any other way to be than in harmony with the Divine Spirit present in all creation and neighbors.

Both the prisoner and the prison guard are held captive by empire and the systems we design to support it. We can only be as free as we allow others to be and when you spend your time aligning and complying with systems of power that derive their strength from keeping a boot firmly placed on someone's neck... you're not going anywhere either. Oppressors are not free either while they are oppressing others. Empire's cannot create peace, embody true strength, or believe in freedom... you can, communities can, but empires who depend on domination for control cannot. The hope you project onto any human made system of power- the church included- is not theirs to deserve credit for... it's God. Creator has given you the seed to plant, the vision to follow, the tiny spark of warmth that refuses to go out because creation is designed for those things; we've chosen instead from ancient times through to today to put our faith in

flimsy human notions of our potential. Broken and bloodied by them, from the cross, Jesus forgives EVERYONE who participated in getting him there because he is daring us to believe something else is possible. A world where no one has to be blamed or “sacrificed” on the alters of greed, capitalism, militarism, racism, white supremacy, misogyny or any other idols because it won’t exist; there’s no price to be paid because there is only abundance.

“What is Truth?” Pilate asks Jesus. Truth is subjective, but the truest thing I know is that God designed us for better. Creator believes in us and existence can be radically better than it is now for absolutely everyone. But we have to stop putting our faith in systems that were not built for all of us and use the tools God gave us to build something completely new instead. Amen.