

Right Rule

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Third Presbyterian Church
November 22, 2015, 8:30am (Christ the King Sunday)
John 18:33-37

It would be an understatement to say that world news in the past week or so has been sobering. It seems that in recent days, there's been far too little to laugh about, far too little to joke about, far too little to celebrate. Everywhere we look, fears reign supreme. All we have to do is say one word, and the images flood our consciousness. Paris. Mali. Brussels. Syria. Muslims. Immigration. Even homeless shelters. Many public and political responses have been jaw-dropping, to say the least. Many tap into and sometimes even capitalize on our deepest, gut-level fears.

In this context, I can't help but think of this word coined by comedian Stephen Colbert - "truthiness." Colbert's tongue-firmly-in-cheek "truthiness" is based on an understanding that thinking with one's head is bad, and knowing with one's heart is good. "Truthiness" rejects verifiable evidence, dismisses facts, and embraces what simply feels like the right thing in your gut. We see this play out all the time. What is true is what I believe, evidence notwithstanding. "Truthiness" allows fear to catch fire and blaze across the soul of our society. "Truthiness" amplifies the voice of fear to earsplitting levels. Fear of Muslims; fear of refugees and immigrants; fear of blighted areas of the city; fear of someone "other."

The context of today's Gospel reading wasn't much different. Fear ruled the way an oppressive empire governed the people of Judea. Fear ruled the response of leaders, both religious and political, who felt threatened by Jesus, by what he might do and who he might lead. An angry crowd waited outside for Pilate to take action.

In that setting comes the question of the moment, the confrontational question Pilate asks Jesus: Are you a king, or aren't you? Are you ruler of the Jewish people, or not? Will you lead a political rebellion against Rome, or not? Tell me. Who are you?

Jesus never quite answers Pilate's misguided question, for Pilate wants to know the facts; Jesus is about truth. Not so much an intellectual definition of truth; certainly not Colbert's gut-based truthiness, but deep, abiding, theological truth. His kingdom is not from **this** world; it's not from here.

David Lose writes, if "[Jesus] and his followers were of this world, then naturally they would use the primary tool this world provides for establishing and keeping power: violence. But Jesus is not of this world and so Jesus will not defend himself through violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom by violence. Jesus will make no followers by violence."

If not violence, then what? If not fear, then what? If not the world's way, then what? How about truth? – the truth that God is love; the truth of incarnation that God "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:18)

Karoline Lewis says that Jesus' kingdom is not about location, but instead "indicates the profound and intimate "place" of relationship with God. Jesus' kingdom is not about amassing additional amounts of control. [It's] is not about his ultimate rule over and above others. Jesus' kingdom is about relationship. Jesus *is* God's kingdom. The concept of kingdom is radically recalculated in the Gospel of John, from kingdoms that strain and sever relationships to a kingdom that puts relationship at its core. That's a whole different perspective on kingdom. When kingdom is construed from the truth of relationship and not rule, from the truth of incarnation and not location, from the truth of love and not law, then Jesus as truth will ring true. This is the truth that the kingdoms of this world cannot see."¹

Jesus does not disavow this world. He disavows the violent means of this world. Even in John, the Gospel often unwittingly misrepresented as the "spiritual" or "other-worldly" Gospel, even in John, Jesus has his feet firmly planted here with us.

Violence is at its core anti-relationship. The fear that violence provokes is too often anti-relationship. Truth, however – deep theological truth – is God's extraordinary relationship with humanity - "God with us" truth. That truth resists fear and invites hope. And hope invites a different response.

Jesus said, "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." So how do we listen to the voice of Jesus today?

Maybe you grew up in a household with one of those red-letter edition Bibles. It had all the words of Jesus printed in red ink. You could find out "exactly" what Jesus said. OK – not really, because even without knowing anything about Biblical studies, we knew Jesus didn't speak English. That said, there's something kind of comforting about the visual impact of Jesus' words standing out on the page, waiting to be voiced aloud and heard once more.

But listening to Jesus' voice involves more than hearing it; truly listening to it calls for our response. "In the New Testament," writes Emilie Townes, "it is possible to speak of truth as something that is done rather than something that is simply believed or thought." Do truth, if you will.

Kenneth Carter suggests the first thing to do is acknowledge that Jesus' voice will always be at odds with the prevailing messages of the kingdoms of this world.² From my little corner of the world, through my computer screen and iPhone screen and television screen, I see a prevailing message of fearful anti-relationship that is at odds with the voice of Jesus – be wary of the other; keep refugees out; build the shelter in someone else's backyard.

And then, maybe we do truth by following Jesus into the practice of building relationships with those who have been excluded *and* with those who have done the excluding. Isn't that the essence of ministry?

Of all the fear-inciting images we've seen in the news lately, so many of them are far away – across the ocean and on other continents. We probably can't hop on a plane tomorrow and do something about directly about those.

¹ Karoline Lewis, _____

² Kenneth Carter, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2.*

But chances are we do know someone here who lives in isolation – maybe it’s an elderly person who’s homebound or in a care facility, who lives in fear and anxiety because her only connection to the outside world is the frightful world she sees on cable news. Maybe we can embody God’s presence by giving her ours, extending a human touch and listening ear, and maybe even relieving some of that fear.

And as a faith community in witness to our own time and place, we can build relationships based on Jesus’ “truth of relationship and not rule, of incarnation and not location, from the truth of love and not law.”

Even in a program-driven church such as ours, our programs are only the means to grow in relation to one another and to our neighbors.

The other day, John Wilkinson and I had another of many one-on-one meetings (or in this case, two-on-one meetings) with a leader from a local community organization. We were talking about the justice issue of providing our low-income and minority children equal access to a good education. The meeting was an hour long. It was a good meeting, with lots of give and take. We explored community perceptions and mutual goals.

And on our way back, we talked about how many more just like that one that we need to do, how “it’s all about building relationships.” We talked about how much time it takes, and it will take, and how there are no shortcuts. The same is true for other issues of justice, be it religious intolerance, racism, sexism, discrimination based on gender identity, and more.

There are no shortcuts to building relationships with those around us. And I don’t know about you, but I for one am glad Jesus didn’t take a shortcut. Karoline Lewis describes his reign as “signaled by love for the world and an intimacy with God that is as close as it gets...a precarious yet poignant place between control and vulnerability.”

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14.) Amen.