Sermons
from The Church of the Covenant

“There are a Couple of Truths”
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Psalm 93

1 The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
2 your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.
3 The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring.
4 More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!
5 Our decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore.

John 18:33–37

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” 34 Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” 35 Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” 36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” 37 Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a 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.”
There are a Couple of Truths

Psalm 93
John 18:33–37

Noted spiritual writer, Kathleen Norris describes truth – human truth – as an “ambiguous mix of fact, fiction and mythology”, while at the same time acknowledging, that Wherever there is truth, it is the Lord's.

In one episode of the television show “My So-Called Life” the lead characters have a new substitute teacher – a radical, rule-shattering, man who throws students' work out the window, and challenges them to “Question Everything.” He teaches English. The episode ultimately finds the teacher leaving the school in disgrace, after he solicits – and then has printed and distributed – student work that parents and school leadership find dangerous, inappropriate, and indecent. As he leaves the school in haste amid a flurry of accusations from the school and questions from his students, one student – Angela – asks him what is the truth, to which he replies “There are a couple of truths.” The students are left behind with their faith in humanity - and adults - a little bit shaken, their understanding of Truth a little less solid, and ultimately with a choice: What truth will they claim as their own?

Jesus had a way of shaking up the foundations on which people had set their understanding of the world. Pilate was just one of the many people seeking to get to the truth of Christ. And like the story of that engaging – but complicated – substitute teacher, there are a couple of truths in this story from John's Gospel. Truths told by different people, which point to competing kingdoms. Truths that hint at contrasting types of power. On the one hand we have Pilate - the institutional authority, whose power resides in the army that stands behind him. On the other hand we have Jesus, whose power comes from the fact that He tells the truth.

In fact, when Pilate asks him whether or not He is a king, this is exactly what he responds with: “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

There are a couple of truths. There is human truth – that ambiguous mix of fact, fiction, and mythology – and there is the truth of Christ, the eternal truth that is deeper and larger than we know. The truth of humans is the truth of power at all costs. It is the truth that says your worth lies in what you control. It is the truth that under-girds the kingdoms of men. It is finite, changeable, manipulative, and
corruptible. It is the truth that can allow a government to lay waste to its own people, or the people of other nations, and then recoil in horror and indignation when their power or their nation comes under attack. It is the truth of the mass shooter, the child abuser, the suicide bomber. It is the self-serving truth, that feeds on its bearers own ego, and creates a reality all its own.

On the other hand, there is the Truth of Christ, the truth that began before time, and shall never be moved. It is the truth that established creation. The truth that stands from everlasting to everlasting. As Christians our spirits know this truth, even when our mind cannot fathom it.

This is the truth that we know: God loves us and chooses us, no matter what – no matter who we are, or where we've been or what we've done – and God calls us all to be a living witness to this love, and this choosing. God calls each one of us out of whatever ugly, unholy mess we might have made of our lives, no matter how unworthy of God's love and God's call we might think that we are. This is true of you, it is true of me, it is even true of those people that you and I and everyone else might find unlovable, unworthy, and irredeemable. It is especially true of those people. Those who have the courage to love when love seems impossible – they are the ones who are “of the truth.” They are the ones who are listening to the voice of Christ the King. They refuse to bow to the systems of this world that demand loyalty through violence, or ascribe power to those with the most money, or greatest might.

This past summer, we witnessed the murders of nine people in a Bible Study in Charleston, South Carolina. In the aftermath of this tragedy, there was grief. There was anger, and lament. There were also astonishing words of forgiveness, and compelling leadership by two women, the governor of the state and the representative of that community. This leadership led to the removal of the Confederate flag, which symbolized the scarred past and a people who shared a tragic history. It claimed the allegiance of some, and through a series of events that can only be interpreted as divine providence, that flag came down. For a few weeks in Charleston, we caught sight of the Truth of Christ. In the forgiveness offered by the family, in the movement of those two women to remove a symbol of oppression, there was a great reversal. What if our allegiance was not to a flag, but to a man on a cross?

"My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says.
Jesus came into the world to point to this truth, the truth of love, of humility, of grace. He came to tear down the systems of oppression that are opposed to this truth. When he spoke of his truth, when he witnessed to it in his life and in his death, those around him, as human beings, found it nearly impossible to comprehend.

While this is a story of two truths, it is also the story of two kingdoms: the kingdom of humans and the kingdom of God. Jesus speaks to Pilate, and responds to his questions about kingship by saying the kingdom of his reign was outside, beyond, not from here. Kingdoms of humans thrive on human truth – the truth founded on ego and power. These kingdoms belong to a system of merit where the weak are exploited, victimized, and silenced, while the strong take for themselves all that they can. It is the way of this world. The mentality of the Kingdoms of men is divide and conquer – to keep people so entrenched in their differences that they are incapable of seeing the larger picture, the humanity and godliness of all. When Christ said that his kingdom was not of this world, what he was saying to Pilate, the man who symbolized the human-kingdom power structure was “You can't even begin to imagine.” The Kingdom of God is so much “greater than.” It exists at the limits of our imagination and is present well beyond our hope. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr describes it this way: “[In the Kingdom of God] we believe that all will be found and revealed inside of the love and mercy of God – for everyone without exception – and for all of creation. All of our little divisions and dramas will be revealed to be just that. All smaller kingdoms and criteria will pass away and mean very little.”

He Goes on to say, “This now and not-yet Reign of God is the foundation for our hope, but it is also the source of our deepest alienation from the world as it is, which is all based on meaningless merit badges, and various forms of win or lose.”

Ultimately, Rohr Argues, in the kingdoms of men, we all lose. Every empire eventually crumbles to dust. No human being reigns supreme forever, no matter how vast their influence. But Christ's Kingdom – the kingdom of God – remains steadfast. It is a place where hatred is met with love and God's justice reigns over men's vengeance. In this kingdom, the humanity of each person is recognized, whomever they are, no matter their race, their nation, their status, or lack thereof. Richard Rohr suggests that, wherever the human and the divine coexist at the same time in the same person, the Kingdom of God is at hand. This is what we see in Christ. In our best moments, we see glimpses of this Kingdom in ourselves as well.
Rohr suggests that ultimately it might not matter what scriptures one reads, or liturgies they attend, or moral positions they hold, as much as how they live trustfully inside God's one world. This, Rohr says, creates honest people – people of the truth – people who don't waste time proving they're right, superior, or saved. They just try to live and love the daily mystery that they are in the loving presence of God.

As anger turns into hatred and then into violence over the news these past few weeks, and we saw the pain of lives destroyed and families in anguish, I thought about the reign of tragedy and terror brought about by the kingdoms of men. I grieved for the families of those lost to this violence. I grieved for us all, as I watched our world leaders vow to return violence against those who would harm their citizens. I wondered how the Kingdom of God, the Reign of Christ, could possibly break into such a troubled world.

I saw the faces of these very young, very violent men, smiling in photographs taken of them in recent months and years. I thought to myself how not very long ago at all, these men, all in their early 20's to early 30's were little boys of nine and ten years old. I wondered to myself what must they have survived, what must they have suffered to arrive at the conclusion that the best way to eradicate the darkness of their lives was to destroy the lives of hundreds of strangers. And I grieved for them as well.

This week, as we stand on the verge of the season of Advent, I grieved, and prayed, that somehow, in some way, Christ's Kingdom would break in and remind us all of how deeply beloved we are by God. As we move into a new season of the year, as we watch and wait for the coming of Christ the Child, I pray that I can also remember Christ the King: the eternal and steadfast, the one who holds all of Creation in love, even in the midst of violence, despair, and hatred.

It is so easy to live in the kingdoms of men. It is so easy to proclaim human truths – far easier than it is to live into the Truth of Christ, to listen to the voice of Jesus, and to affirm his message. You are loved. You are Loved. You are Loved. Amen.