

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“What Is Truth?”**

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*“Jesus said . . . ‘Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’ Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’ After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, ‘I find no guilt in him.’” (Jn. 18:38a).*

“What is truth?” Pilate says. It’s not really a question and Pilate doesn’t seem interested in any answer Jesus might give, because the text says Pilate was already on his way out to address the crowd. But what was Pilate thinking with the statement, “What is truth?” You can almost hear the disappointment and skepticism in his voice. You get the sense that Pilate thought at one time he knew the truth, knew how the world worked, was confident in what he had been taught as a child. But now, for whatever reasons, he isn’t so sure.

As a child Pilate would have been familiar with the official and sanctioned list of Roman gods. Newest on the list was the emperor, proclaiming himself a deity, erecting temples and statues to himself and demanding allegiance all around the Roman Empire. But Pilate *knows* the emperor, knows he “puts his pants on one leg at a time”. Maybe all that religion has left a foul taste in Pilate’s mouth, and now he thinks himself a well-educated, practical pagan. The Roman world was full of them and so is ours. Inwardly, they are mostly indifferent to religion; their priorities are elsewhere. They are ambitious. They have fire in the belly and view the world with an eye as to what they might squeeze out of it. As far as they are concerned, paying tribute to any god would be a wasteful distraction.

Meanwhile, the Roman Empire had expanded to unprecedented size and was bumping up against dozens of other cultures, each having their own set of gods that were not on Rome’s approved list. An example would be the Judaism, and the monotheism that was so striking and unique. Pilate was in the heart of Judaism, in Jerusalem, perhaps a stone’s throw from the temple. At that very moment, the Jews were celebrating Judaism’s highest festival, the Passover, with thousands of pilgrims streaming into the city from distant lands, speaking all manner of different languages. Even Pilate had to admit the sights and sounds and ceremonies were all very impressive. So . . . what is truth?

In addition, as governor of Judea, Pilate surely received reports about Jesus: the miracles, the healings, something about raising a dead man from the grave, and the large throngs of people now following him. But here Jesus is standing before him, bound, bruised and beaten, evidently powerless. What’s the truth here? Who really is this man? And does it really matter to Pilate? After all, his duty and highest priority is to keep order in that part of the empire. If things start getting out of control, truth will have to take a back seat. Pilate is practical in that way.

What about today? What is truth today? For all our technology and tools, for all our discoveries and dissertations, books and blogs, innovations and inventions, for all our knowledge and know-how there sure seems to be a lot of confusion about what is truth.

What is truth, with the electronic proliferation of sources of information, many of them less than reliable? What is truth, with the widespread dissemination of “fake news” through social media? What is truth with the Russian propaganda machine dismissing war-time atrocities as nothing more than Ukrainian propaganda? What is truth, with politicians who are in the habit of playing fast and loose with it? Truth sits on their work benches, alongside hyperbole, sentimentality, bluster, and just kidding. Use as needed. What is truth in countries where the independent news sources have all been shut down? What is truth when the media routinely publicizes heavily slanted opinion masquerading as news. Tell me what echo chamber you’re sitting in, and I’ll tell you what your truth is.

What is truth? We live in an age where there are a lot of skeptical people just like Pilate who think there isn’t any objective truth. It’s called post-modernism. 78% of baby boomers reject the idea of absolute truth. Instead, they believe things are true to you because that’s the way you were brought up. So, many believe truth is an artificial construction. Everyone has their own truths; you get to pick and choose your truths.

Think how this impacts the Christian faith. Most Americans accept the reality of heaven. Most also reject the reality of hell. Asked what, then, do they do with those biblical passages that reference hell, they'll say, "Well I don't believe that." It's a sort of cafeteria theology where some things you put on your plate and leave others behind. But you see what we're doing with this? **We** then become the gatekeepers for truth, the arbiters between truth and fallacy. The self determines what truth is and becomes a little god.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked. Here are a few simple truths I believe. First, I believe truth is not determined by consulting my gut instincts or by taking a popular vote. You don't always arrive at truth by counting noses, not in culture or congress or the Supreme Court.

Second. I believe the Bible doesn't contain God's Word; it is God's Word. It is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. I believe that and will stake my life on that. Not that it is meant to serve as a science textbook, or to satisfy all my curious questions. "These were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Third. I understand that even if you get ten people in a room saying God's Word is their source of truth, the traditions of men and our reason have ways of meddling with the truth of God's Word and distorting it. So, depending on who you ask, the wine turns into blood in a process called transubstantiation, as in Catholic tradition, or the wine is not the blood of Jesus because that's unreasonable. It only represents the blood as a symbol, as in much of protestant theology. Or, it is what Jesus said it is, the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, as we believe and practice.

Therefore, I subscribe to and have bound myself to the Lutheran Confessions, not "insofar as" but "because" they agree with Scripture. They insist that Scripture interprets Scripture. Not the pope or the councils, not our reason or logic. Scripture interprets Scripture.

Fourth, based on this Word of God, we believe the man standing bound, beaten and bruised before Pilate is God's Son, the Messiah. He is the Way, *the Truth*, and the Life. He doesn't hate His creation, nor is He indifferent to it. He loves it, (and us), and came down to redeem it.

What is truth? Truth is, that's your Savior standing in Pilate's palace, and that's your sin and your death hanging on the cross, and that's your victory bursting out of the tomb. He gives it to you in the means of grace.

What is truth? You are baptized into His death and resurrection, and even if you have only a mustard seed of faith, for Jesus it's quite enough. He is gracious and generous in that way and wants all to be saved and has promised, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." God does not deal with us according to our sins, but according to his grace and mercy.

Truth is He's been with you all the days of your life, guiding you like a shepherd, and when you look back at your years you can probably see that too. Though we worry about the future, we also know he'll be there. The future belongs to him, all of it, including that hour in which you breathe your last. That's not outside His control or His plans for you, for precious in His sight is the death of His saints. He'll see you through it and will be waiting there on the other side. Until then, the truth is you belong, body and soul, in life and death, not to yourself, but to your Savior, Jesus Christ.

For a long time, Pilate stood alone before a hostile crowd. His was the lone voice trying to acquit Jesus. In all four Gospels, Pilate nearly acted as Jesus' lawyer. He defended Jesus courageously, speaking up for Jesus when no one else would. Eventually, he caved before the pressures of the crowd, and I think every one of us knows how that happens.

Ever since we've recited his name in the creeds as the one who sent Jesus to the cross, as if He were the only one. For this he has been condemned and jeered from pulpit and pew for not having the courage to stand with his conviction that Jesus was innocent. But the real question today is do you have the courage to stand with your conviction that Jesus is the Truth? In a crowd, a culture that is becoming hostile to the faith, can you stand alone before the crowd, for the sake of Him, for the sake of the Truth? Amen.