

## What does it mean to follow Jesus? Pursue Truth

Based on John 18: 33-38

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*33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' <sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' <sup>35</sup>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?' <sup>36</sup>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.' <sup>37</sup>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.' <sup>38</sup>Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'*

Forgive me if I begin our contemplation of this passage from holy scripture with a quote from the less than holy celebrity, Harvey Weinstein. That consistent abuser of his power as a producer said in his own defense, "I came of age in the 60's and 70's, when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the culture then." He meant to say his own ugly behavior was ok, somehow, because, essentially, what's true now was not true then. Truth has changed, Weinstein said, and Andrew Cuomo and countless other bullies have said the same thing. Are they right? Has the truth changed about power dynamics, about what's ethical behavior in the workplace? No. Women have always felt intimidated, uncomfortable, and even traumatized by sexual harassment; no one has ever argued that sexual harassing your employees was the best way to run a workplace. What changed was not the truth, only the offender's permission to ignore the truth.

This is the baffling aspect of American history—Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." And our newborn country rallied, cheered, fought the tyrant who diminished their humanity. And yet, somehow managed to justify the buying and selling of a portion of its own population, for another hundred years. The truth was always there. But there were ways to avoid dealing with it; there were well-established work-arounds, there was permission.

When Jesus comes before Pilate in John's gospel, he stakes his claim on the truth, about which he seems to have no doubts. "I came to testify to the truth," he says. Call me a king, or don't, he tells Pilate, whatever. I'm here to tell the truth.

And Pilate asks Jesus, what is truth? Very philosophical of him. Very deep. Well, what is truth, really? Does Pilate really want to know? Is he really asking Jesus a question? Or is he saying—look the truth is hard to pinpoint; it's slippery. There are alternative facts; it depends who you ask.

That would be a classic autocrat move. To say, oh truth, that's something that children believe in! I decide what's true and what's not true.

Remember that just *before* the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin was swearing up and down that he had no intention of invading Ukraine. It made me wonder, why is he so blatantly lying? How do you slap someone in the face and at the same time deny that you bear them any ill feelings?

But the thing with Putin is, he has created a world where there simply is no such thing as true and false. He could claim to be 8 feet tall and do it without so much as a blush; if you gave him a lie detector test, his heart rate would never increase. Because in his world, Putin does not speak to *describe* what is real; he speaks to *decide* what is real. God said let there be light and there was light. Putin says, that's not a war, there's no Ukraine and in his mind--no war, no Ukraine.

As Americans, and more importantly as followers of Jesus, we need to see clearly how dangerous is Putin's utter disregard for truth. Because we've seen glimpses of something along those lines in our own country. In the last few years, I've had conversations in which family members or friends seem to have given up on truth. When the objection, "I don't think that's true," was raised, the other person responded, "I don't bother finding out if it's true, I just pass it on." Or in another case, "that's not the point." Really? What is the point, of speaking, of writing, of posting on social media, what is the point of language at all, if it's not to communicate things we know to be true?

Look, it's a confusing world. Just this week there was a deep-faked video of Volodomir Zelensky apparently calling on Ukrainians to surrender. People lie and they may do it convincingly, there are higher tech ways to lie nowadays. So it may be difficult to tell who is lying and why. But it's *our job*. To sort through the untruths and the half-truths in pursuit of truth. We can't follow Jesus and love our neighbor if we are not properly oriented to what is true around us. By

all accounts, Jesus could *tell*, he could see into the hearts of people, he knew a lie for what it was. But we may have to work at it—and we may have to work at it a lot.

There are two aspects necessary to pursuing the truth. First, we have to believe that there is such a thing. We can't be like Pilate—well, what is truth, really? Friends, we cannot continue to believe in God unless we believe that there is such a thing as truth. Just because you can't *contain* the truth on a bumper sticker or in a political slogan, doesn't mean that there *is* no truth. We may find it hard to articulate what is true. But we should never let go of our ability to recognize a lie. To recognize it and call it out and refuse to give it air.

I was never a huge fan of the movie *Forest Gump*. But there's one scene that stays in my mind. The almost-girlfriend, Jenny, has an abusive boyfriend, and Forest sees the boyfriend hitting her. Jenny makes excuses for the boyfriend, he doesn't mean it, it's my fault, but Forest insists, very simply, "He shouldn't be hitting you." Period. It doesn't take a genius, there's no need to go into justifications; he shouldn't be hitting you—that's what's true in that situation. It's so important that we maintain our ability to see and to articulate the truth—people's lives depend on it. Children shouldn't be kept in cages. Hospitals and schools should not be bombed. We can't let the ubiquitous phrase, "It's complicated," be a copout; we have to be willing to stake our claim on what we know to be true.

And at the same time, and equally important, to pursue the truth requires humility. We don't *own* the truth, we don't keep it in our back pocket. The truth doesn't change, but *we* do. Our language changes, our vision changes, and our ability to articulate the things that have always been true changes. What we carved in stone a hundred years ago becomes inadequate to our understanding of the truth today. We hope that our ability to see and say the truth improves over time, that we listen to more voices, that we get a fuller picture. But there have definitely been periods when our ability to perceive the truth has deteriorated. We need to remember that we are not immune to believing in lies or to giving up on truth. We pursue the truth; we don't own it.

What Putin's Russia should teach us is the same thing that Hitler's Germany taught us, the same thing that Stalin's Russia taught us, the same thing that the McCarthy era taught us—truth matters. It is not created in the mouth of the speaker. When powerful people lie, their lies are powerful, even deadly. So it is up to all of us, however much power we have or don't have, it is up to all of us to pursue the truth. It won't be handed to us in a Facebook meme or a slogan. We

have to go after it, sift out what we hear to the best of our ability, and return always to what we know by faith, of who God is and who we are created to be.