

Message: An Inconvenient Truth

“Not guilty!”

The false charges wouldn't stick. Pilate knew it. Herod knew it. Caiaphas and the council knew it. Even those who had no stake in the argument between the Jewish sects could see the truth. Jesus wasn't guilty of the false charges the Jewish religious leaders brought against him. He was innocent.

So why did Jesus die on a cross? It's one of the great mysteries of faith. There are many reasons given – theological and other. Jesus is the Lamb of God, and lambs were sacrificed for the sins of others. Jesus is the gateway, through him the boundaries on Earth were torn open so we have direct access to God. Jesus died to fulfill prophecy, to keep God's promise to humanity and deliver us from ourselves. Jesus was caught in the political intrigue between the religious, political and military rulers of the day.

The final exchange between Pilate and Jesus tells us a lot. Jesus said, *“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to [be on the side of] truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”* Pilate's response is telling: *“What is truth?”* (John 18:37b-38). Pilate is asking about the reality of humanity's relationship to the divine. There are many who ask that question in the world today.

After the exchange, Pilate said to the Jewish leaders, “Not guilty!” There was no reason for Jesus to die. And yet, a short time later, Pilate caved into the crowd and sent Jesus to his death.

Why did Jesus die? It's a difficult question. The simple, Sunday school answer is this: Jesus died to atone for our sins. This is one of those grey areas in our faith, where there are a lot of opinions.

For example, not everyone can accept the idea that God would willingly kill his only child. Others see Jesus on cross as a battle between good and evil, where Jesus wins. Some see Jesus' life and death as a means of bringing positive change to humanity, a moral influence. Others see Jesus' death as a way to balance the scales of justice with God. And some see Jesus as a scapegoat, a victim whose death is God's way of

overcoming the violence of humanity so we're now able to enjoy the fullness of creation without fear of ultimate death.

Our opinion is less important than what lies at the heart of the matter, at the heart of our faith. Jesus was crucified for being a truth no one could bear! Peter tried to defend the truth, but ended up denying him because he was afraid. Judas wanted to believe the truth, but ended up betraying him because he couldn't accept it.

I believe Jesus died because the truth is too uncomfortable and inconvenient for us to bear. The truth reveals that we are not God. We are not in control. That's reality. We are created beings, not the creator. And we don't like it! We prefer our power, reputation and wealth just as they are, thank you, no matter if it does lead to injustice, oppression and a “me, first” way of thinking, speaking and acting. To say or think otherwise would be too ... uncomfortable.

What is truth? Jesus said it out loud so there would be no doubt, “[God], I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me” (John 17:6-8, NRSV).

The truth, the reality is this: Jesus is the Son of God, sent to save us. That's the kind of revelation that changes everything! God isn't distant, uncaring, abusive or manipulative. God is loving and always working to bring good out of bad. We become part of that reality when we believe in God, trust the Holy Spirit and believe that Jesus was sent by God. But there's more ...

Jesus offered this prayer for us, “*Make them holy – consecrated [set apart] - with the truth. Your word is consecrating truth [a reality that sets us apart in a special way]. In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. I'm consecrating myself for their sakes so they'll be truth-consecrated in their mission*” (vv17-19, MSG).

Who do we become by the power of truth?

When we embrace the truth, we become people who are filled with the joy of Christ. Just as Jesus was not of this world, but lived in it, all who believe in Jesus are not of this world, yet live in it. We are spiritual people, who know and speak of spiritual things. Because of that, the godless world will hate and despise the ways of those who follow Jesus. Yet we're under God's protection and care. The world doesn't define us any more than it defined Jesus (John 17:13-16).

When we live the way Jesus did, we bring joy to God. That's because we're embracing the truth – the reality of who Jesus was, and the knowledge that there is a God who loves us unconditionally sets us free from the limits and boundaries of this world. And, the best part is that God returns that joy to us many times over. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us gives us hope that is stronger than despair, a light that is stronger than darkness, and a love that is stronger than death.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

Jesus wasn't defined by the cross. He overcame it.

Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus' cross, following the beaten, humiliated, bleeding savior. Jesus led, Simon followed, bearing the cross. We, too, follow Christ. We, too, have a cross to bear. Jesus shows us the way and it's not easy, but we can make it. We can bear it. We can overcome. After all, Jesus is walking with us.

Jesus said, *“I'm praying ... for those who will believe in me The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind ...”* (v20).

Jesus knew where he came from and where he was going. Jesus knew his mission. He gave glory to God in every moment of his life. He spent three years teaching and showing others the new way to live, passing the mission on. In his humanity, he struggled with the harshness of the final steps. Death isn't easy for anyone. Yet Jesus knew that the only way to overcome fear, hatred, wickedness, evil and death is to offer something greater: unending, eternal, unconditional love.

The source of Love Incarnate is God, who is perfect love. God’s love will get us through hard times, difficult days and impossible moments. That’s because God’s love not only pardons, it heals. We’re God’s wounded healers, living in a world that embraces darkness, pain, despair and a culture of death. We are to be light in the darkness. We are to be the ones who build each other up in love, not seeking our own agendas, but following where the Holy Spirit leads. We are to be so loving and caring that people will be drawn to us. Sadly, in the past few months and years, we have demonstrated otherwise. Yet there is hope.

Jesus surrounded himself with people who, like us, had failings and shortcomings. The events of Jesus’ last week reveal the disciples’ human nature and weaknesses: Judas betrays Jesus for a pocketful of coins. The disciples sleep while Jesus agonizes in the garden. Peter’s anger causes him to take up a sword and strike the high priest’s slave. The chief priests act out of fear or jealousy of Jesus. Pilate was willing to hand over a man he believes to be innocent. And, perhaps most poignant of all, Jesus’ own very human desire to escape the crucifixion.

Is it possible that even today, our own human nature, weaknesses, and failings cause us to betray, deny, convict, and crucify again?

This service offers an opportunity for us to become more aware of our own humanity and relationship with Christ. Allow the moments to draw you into the action and events that led to the actual crucifixion and relate them to the events and actions in your own life. Embrace the truth of who Jesus is, the reality of God, and follow him without reservation.

Jesus’ last words give us hope, “*Father, into your hands I entrust my life*” (Luke 23:46). These words reflect Psalm 31:5, “*I entrust my spirit into your hands. ...God of faithfulness - you have saved me.*” Jesus’ absolute trust and faith in God was true to the very end. These are simple words with a lifetime of meaning and depth to them.

I pray that you’ll take Jesus’ words to heart. Place your soul in God’s care. Give God your absolute trust and faith. When you do, you’ll know hope, peace and joy. You’ll be glad you followed Jesus, for he is the way, the truth and the life.

Let us pray ...

Hear us, O God. We have taken the persecution and crucifixion of the Lamb for granted. We have dropped the ball with the praise we don't give, the love we won't share with others, and what we refuse to forgive. This is repenting hour. We commit to redirect our will to align with the will of the great I Am. Open our souls to the great truth: Jesus is the Messiah, your Son, our Savior. In the matchless name of Jesus, we pray for forgiveness and healing. Amen.

John 18:15-27, 31-38 (CEB)

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Because this other disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard. However, Peter stood outside near the gate. Then the other disciple (the one known to the high priest) came out and spoke to the woman stationed at the gate, and she brought Peter in. The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, “Aren’t you one of this man’s disciples?”

“I’m not,” he replied. The servants and the guards had made a fire because it was cold. They were standing around it, warming themselves. Peter joined them there, standing by the fire and warming himself.

Meanwhile, the chief priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered, “I’ve spoken openly to the world. I’ve always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews gather. I’ve said nothing in private. Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I told them. They know what I said.”

After Jesus spoke, one of the guards standing there slapped Jesus in the face. “Is that how you would answer the high priest?” he asked.

Jesus replied, “If I speak wrongly, testify about what was wrong. But if I speak correctly, why do you strike me?” Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing with the guards, warming himself. They asked, “Aren’t you one of his disciples?”

Peter denied it, saying, “I’m not.”

A servant of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said to him, “Didn’t I see you in the garden with him?” Peter denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

[...]

Pilate responded, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your Law.”

The Jewish leaders replied, “The Law doesn’t allow us to kill anyone.” (This was so that Jesus’ word might be fulfilled when he indicated how he was going to die.)

Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?”

Pilate responded, “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”

Jesus replied, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here.”

“So you are a king?” Pilate said.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.”

“What is truth?” Pilate asked.

After Pilate said this, he returned to the Jewish leaders and said, “I find no grounds for any charge against him.”