

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church 11.22.15
Christ the King
John 18:33-37

“What is Truth?”

In the aftermath of Paris and Mali, many of us are left wondering if there is any place in this world that we are safe from flying bullets and the crossfire created by opposing religious and political factions, all claiming to have their own version of the truth. In today's gospel story Jesus also finds himself in the midst of intense and deadly crossfire. On one side are the religious leaders who have deceptively presented Jesus to Pilate, the Roman Governor. They despise their Roman overlords who have robbed them of their autonomy and inflicted them with burdensome taxes. They hope for a Messiah that can muster a rebellion against Rome. Jesus is not this kind of King and they want him gone.

On the other side of the crossfire is Pilate who is financed and supplied by one of the most terrifyingly powerful empires of the ancient world. He is a man of the world. His background check on Jesus has already determined that Jesus has no army, is not part of any terrorist cell and therefore is no immediate threat. And yet, Pilate has to be careful. Although he is the most powerful man in the city he can't afford to jeopardize the fragile peace. He is willing to do the dirty work if it means that nothing gets back to Rome that would cause the emperor to lose faith in his ability to keep control of the province. In the end, he wants the Jews and Jesus to know that the emperor is boss.

Then the unexpected happens. In the polished marble halls of Pilate's headquarters, Jesus turns Pilate's notions of power upside down when he says, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Instead of firing back into the crossfire by using kingly threats or terrorist tactics he embodies a different kind of power and announces a stunning new way to rule human hearts. Jesus confidently proclaims to Pilate that He is here to bear witness to the truth about God's love. To which the cynical Pilate, who has probably known only violence his entire life, asks Jesus the million dollar question, “What is truth?”

In this very fragmented, polarized world in which you and I live where competing religions, ideologies, political and economic systems all have their own version of the truth it appears that Pilate's question is strangely our question too. What are we to make of Jesus' regal claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life?"

Although religious groups differ greatly in their understanding of beliefs and practices, it is also true that most, if not all of the major religions around the world have their own version of the Golden Rule, which I hold as one of God's universal truths to which Jesus and other great wisdom teachers bear witness. For example,

For Christians it is stated as, "Do unto others as you would have done unto you."

In the Jewish Talmud, Rabbi Hillel said, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to others. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary."

In Buddhism can be found the teaching, "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."

In Confucianism is the truth: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you."

Islam says, "Seek for humanity that of which you are desirous for yourself, that you may be a believer."

And lastly we have, The Law of One whose author is anonymous: "For we are all one. When one is harmed, all are harmed. When one is helped, all are healed."

There are windows in our history when humanity receives a divinely inspired vision for a world unified by a concern and a commitment to not repeat our violent past. One such time was December 10, 1948 when the United Nations General Assembly ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the aftermath of the atrocities committed by the Nazi Germany. It represented the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled. It is based on the Four Freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want.

The *Guinness Book of Records* describes the Declaration as the world's "Most Translated Document." Eleanor Roosevelt supported its adoption as a declaration rather than as a treaty because she believed that it would have the same kind of influence on global society as the United States Declaration of Independence had within the United States. In this, she proved to be correct. Even though it is not legally binding, the Declaration has been adopted in many countries or has influenced most national constitutions since 1948. Unfortunately there has been a great struggle in implementing it.

You and I live in a time in our history when we too need to take action. It is time for Christians to become better Christians; For Jews to become better Jews; Muslims to become better Muslims; for Agnostics to become better Agnostics. For all humans to seek to become better humans. How can we do that? With God's grace to be sure. We can start by encouraging each faith group to challenge itself to go more deeply into its own teachings to find not only the Golden rule but search for the God who created all of us in God's holy image. If each faith group can see the other as a human being created in God's image then it will be much harder to commit violence.

As members of the Christian community, we need to listen carefully to Jesus and look for the universal truth of love in which he embodied—the cosmic dimensions of his kingdom. In many of the stories of Jesus' life we see that he was revealing to followers the importance of expanding the Golden Rule to include not only fellow believers but people of all faiths, including those who do not believe in any kind of God.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan in which an innocent man is robbed, beaten, and nearly dies because others couldn't see him as human, Jesus shows us that he intended the Golden Rule to apply to other human beings outside our specific ethnicity, religion, political group or nationality. When a so-called religious expert on the Law asked Jesus what he must do to achieve eternal life, Jesus asked him how he understood the truth. The lawyer replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." But Jesus knew that even the religious expert couldn't yet see that all human beings are one's neighbor.

Jesus brought this the Golden Rule and the Two Great Commandments as foundation principles in his Kingdom of Love. Although Jesus' spirit-propelled kingdom was not *from* this world, it is found *in* this world when we define our neighbor as including all of God's creation, not just the ones we identify with, or feel safe with, in the crossfire of our violent world. It is then, and only then, that God's love truly reigns in our hearts. On this day in our liturgical year when we call Christ our King, we see God's beloved Son ascend the throne of the Cross, inaugurating a strong and compassionate reign of love, free of coercion and violence, uniting all of the kingdoms of this world. Amen.