

God's Mirror for the Church

Philip A. Amerson
Christ the King Sunday
First United Methodist Church

November 25, 2018
John 18: 33-40
San Diego, California

Poem:

*Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun,
Now may I wither into the truth.*

William Butler Yeats, *The Coming of Wisdom With Time*

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: It's a two-thousand-year-old question. It awaits your answer this morning. For two millennia this query has ricocheted across social, cultural and political landscapes. It is the question Pilate asks of Jesus. **What is truth?** (John 18:38).

And the response that Jesus gives? ----- **Silence.** -----

As Frederick Buechner says, "Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question. He just stands there. *Stands*, and stands *there*." (Blog post "Truth"(11/19/18) first published in [Wishful Thinking](#) and later in [Beyond Words](#).)

Buechner goes on: "Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, it is possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat. Instead of truth, Pilate has only expedience... Pilate asks, 'What is truth?' and for years there have been politicians, scientists, theologians, philosophers, poets, and so on to tell him. The sound they make is like the sound of crickets chirping." (*Ibid.*)

Again, and again, Jesus has modeled truth. A truth communicated not by words, but by the actions of Jesus, by the way he calls on followers to live. His healing the sick, his welcoming children, his eating with sinners and welcoming those who are at the margins of society into his movement -- these are the truth.

God's Mirror for the Church, Philip Amerson, November 25, 2018, p. 1

Too often, talk isn't matched by action. Donald English, a British Methodist pastor once noted, "The world has enough salesmen of the Gospel. What we need is more free samples."

I remember **Mrs. Olive Anderson**. By the time I met her she was in her late seventies and had lost most of her eyesight. We worshipped together in a downtown parish in Atlanta, Georgia. Her physical impairments did little to slow her down. She was active in the church in several ways. There are two things I remember distinctly about her. First, when we sang hymns she sang lustily. She seemed to have memorized all the words to every hymn. I know this because often I would see her holding her hymnal open and it would be turned to the wrong page. Or, on occasion I noticed the hymnal was upside down. Still, she seemed to know every word.

Secondly, I remember the Sunday Mrs. Anderson spoke in the worship service. The Andersons, you see, had spent most of their lives in China as missionaries. It is where they met as young missionaries. [<https://methodistmission200.org/anderson-sidney-an-disheng-1889-1978/>]

Olive Lipscomb and Sid Anderson were married while home on furlough in 1920 after meeting as young missionaries. For over three decades they taught, preached, established clinics and cooperatives. They tied prayer to social programs that touched tens of thousands each week. The morning Mrs. Anderson stood in front of the congregation she began with the words: "*If God calls you to be a missionary, don't stoop to be a king*" She paused and then with her dimmed eyes dancing she added with a smile... "*or QUEEN!*"

I think of the Andersons each year when Christ the King Sunday arrives in the fall. The line about not stooping to be a "king or queen" has been attributed to many. However, if I have ever met persons who are part of the royal family in the Jesus Movement, it include the Andersons. When one met them, one had an encounter with TRUTH at a deep level. It was the truth of lives lived in service to Christ.

We in the United States are a people who have sought to be freed of kings and queens. Our national identity is shaped by being separatists and "Protestants." This is the narrative beneath our celebration of Thanksgiving. I recall the time I was appointed to a new parish in Indianapolis. The church was a grand old cathedral of a building, about the size of this one. I took our son and daughter to see our new church home. My son, Andrew, eleven at the time,

walked right up the long aisle and into the chancel. He then moved to the pulpit. He stood there for a while and then looking out at me, he said, **"The Puritans wouldn't like this at all!"**

You heard the report from Bonnie Schwartz this morning. The Pastor Parish Relations Committee has been collecting the characteristics and attributes desired in the next lead pastor for congregation. Thank you for the many thoughtful responses you provided. Some of what was shared is contradictory. For example, you have asked for someone young with thirty years of experience. You stopped short of wanting someone who walks on water and performs a dozen miracles by noon each day – and two dozen miracles on Sunday. There are some common attributes you note. One of the most frequently stated requests, in one fashion or another, is that you want someone of integrity. I read that as someone who knows how to "live the truth."

I know the committee and bishop are taking your suggestions seriously. Here is something else I know: It may take a year, or two, or three, but you will discover the next lead pastor is not perfect. Even so, the truth is that you will come to love and appreciate this person despite any flaws you discover. You see, the goodness, the value, the deeper truth will be in the relationship you develop together.

One other thing. I suspect many of you may have missed it. It may take a year or two, or three but the new lead pastor will discover that you are not a perfect people! Here is the good news... you have seven months to work on improving. Where there are patterns of distrust, gossip, conspiracy thinking, division – you have some time to work on those things.

Jesus is silent -- Just stands there. He has already given the best answer possible about truth by how he has lived. **Truth is discovered in right relationships, rather more than in right answers.** As Parker Palmer tells us: **Truth is mirrored more in relationships than it is captured in doctrine or law.** (Per Parker Palmer, see the work *To Know As We Are Known*.) He writes, "In prayer I begin to realize that I not only know but am known... Truth is in relationship. It is a commitment to conversation." He goes on: "The hallmark of a community of truth is in its claim that reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it." (p. 25).

Relationships are broken or avoided in so many ways. There are past wounds we all carry. We have different histories and family backgrounds. We struggle with different demons: pain, *God's Mirror for the Church*, Philip Amerson, November 25, 2018, p. 3

loneliness, childhood disappointments, alcoholism, betrayal, drug abuse, ideological and political differences. Any one of these is enough to undercut the truth possible in establishing a web of communal relationships.

Palmer writes: "The ancient human question 'Who am I?' leads inevitably to the equally important question 'Whose am I? – for there is no self, outside of relationship.'" (Let Your Life Speak, p. 17)

Currently in this nation, relationships are being tested. There is an undercutting the factual realities necessary to guarantee the discovery of truth in relationship. Facts are not the entirety of truth. Facts are stubborn things, they point to the truth but do not carry the entirety of it. Facts are foundational but must also be sifted and afforded the greater meaning in a context. Facts are necessary ingredients to building healthy relationships.... They are essential but not sufficient to answer the question Pilate is asking.

Forty years ago, Hannah Arendt wrote: *"A people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."*^[2] – Hannah Arendt, 1978, *NYReview of Books*, Oct. 26, 1978.

Sid and Olive Anderson knew this reality. They lived it. In 1943 Sid spent almost a year in a prison camp run by the Japanese. They both suffered privation and separation. Yet there was a vibrancy about them. I knew them at the end of their lives. I could witness a deep truth by the way they chose to live. They have left behind a legacy of Methodism as both commitment to piety and social justice. They pointed to the greater truth of relationships.

Professor Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary notes: *"When kingdom is construed from the truth of relationship and not rule, from the truth of incarnation and not location, from the truth of love and not law, then Jesus as truth will ring true."* (*Working Preacher*, November 15, 2015).

The scene of Jesus before Pilate is poignant. However, this isn't the only trial that is underway. Jesus has also been before the chief priests – so much for this not being political. More importantly, Fred Craddock says that these places, governor's palace and religious courts, are not where the real trial is taking place. "The real trial has already occurred around the charcoal

fire, Peter (and the church) **are being tried and found wanting.**" (Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, p. 481).

All of us are tried. We all face the question, "What is truth?" Mrs. Anderson shows the way forward. I think of others... who choose a relationship with the Christ... as Peter finally did.

In a recent the book *Blood Letters: the Story of Lin Zhao*, we learn of a young woman, educated in Methodist Schools in China, a member of the Communist Party who then saw the tyranny of the Mao. (*Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China*, New York: Basic Books, 2018.) She drew on her Christian faith, spoke against the tyranny. She spent years in prison and began to write of her faith and her commitment to a higher truth. Her writings were shared outside the prison. Authorities took away all paper or pens. Lin Zhao continued to write but tearing pieces of bedding and pricking her fingers – using her hair and blood to continue her witness. She was martyred for her beliefs in 1968. Today thousands seek to honor her in China. The Andersons had left China three decades earlier, but their witness and Lin Zhao's witness continues. It is a truth that cannot be contained or reduced to a few "facts."

There are so many others. The people of the French Huguenot Community of Le Chambon during the Second World War in France. Who hid and rescued more than 3,500 Jews, mostly children from the Nazi onslaught.

This morning I think of others – Sunday School teachers in this congregation, those who work in the "loaves and fishes" food ministry, those who sing faithfully each week in the choir, the amazing generosity of one person from this church to those who suffered great loss in the Paradise, CA wild fires. I think also of folks you probably don't know: Francis Neighbors who saw to it that every child in her congregation received a gift on their birthday, Wain Martin who started a bingo game in the local jail where the sheriff and guards were asked to play along with inmates, Margaret Hadley who started a tutoring program and worked in it for many years.

I don't remember anything else Mrs. Anderson said on that Sunday more than forty years ago, but I remember her vibrancy. She was a truth tied up in a person... and it was a joy to behold her. The quote, "don't stoop to be a king" (or queen), I had heard often in the small Christian College I attended... but when, Mrs. Anderson spoke I understood it. It was quote wrapped in human flesh.

God's Mirror for the Church, Philip Amerson, November 25, 2018, p. 5

It was a statement of an awareness that people of faith are called to the service as the highest of truths. The truth that comes from relationship with the Ruler of the Universe – the one we speak of today as Christ the King.

Amen.

++++++

John 18:33-40 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters^[a] 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." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.