

Testifying to the Truth

John 18:33-38a

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Today's sermon is entitled "Testifying to the Truth," based on John 18:33-38a. (It was originally called, "A Wise Reign" and only went to verse 37, but Spirit has led me in a different direction. Also, you might want to take the pew Bibles and keep them open to NT p. 138.)

I am working on a book with my former student Professor Mitzi J. Smith of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA. The book is tentatively entitled, *Testimonies and the Testifying Bible: Disruptive and Creative Interpretations*, to be published by Cascade. (The title seems a little clunky, so we may revise it.) When the book is published in 2022 or so, I'm sure that copies will sell out quickly, so pre-order your copy now from Cascade. Operators are standing by. (I'm teasing.)

Seriously, Prof. Mitzi and I are looking at the Bible as a book of testimonies. That book will have a chapter on testifying in the Gospel of John. I will write that chapter because I have written two books on John, one of which is entitled *Word and Soul* and is in the church library and is for sale from Liturgical Press. (I am engaging here in shameless self-promotion.)

So, this sermon comes out of the chapter on John in my book with Prof. Mitzi.

When someone is preaching, I like to ask them three Ts: text, title, and thesis. You know my text--John 18:33-38a--and my title-- "Testifying to the Truth". My thesis? Here it is: We testify to the truth that God knows us and loves us deeply. Let me say that again. My thesis is this: We testify to the truth that God knows us and loves us deeply. Got it? Good.

Our scripture this morning is one scene in the longer episode in which Jesus appears before Pilate. And that episode is part of the passion narrative, which includes Jesus' trial, crucifixion, death, and burial. All four Gospels contain a passion narrative, but the Gospel of John is a little different: Jesus and Pilate have an extended theological discussion, and at the cross appear the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, traditionally identified as John. Last Sunday some of us participated in the Houses of Worship Tour. I began the tour with the church closest to where I live: Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church east of here on Farmington. At the altar is the crucified Christ, with his mother on one side and the Beloved on the other. That scene comes from the Gospel of John.

John is a book of testimony. It claims to be the testimony of the Beloved, whose job is to testify to the truth.

He gets that job from Jesus. In our scripture today, Pilate asks if Jesus is king of the Jews, or king of the Judeans, as I translate it in *Word and Soul*. Jesus says that his kingdom, his kin-dom, his reign, his power is not from this world; it's out of this world!

Pilate says, "So you are a king?" But Jesus wears the title of king lightly. He says that his task is to testify to the truth. Jesus' word is truth (John 17:17b). The truth sets us free (8:32b). If we

belong to the truth, we listen to Jesus' voice (18:37). And he becomes our good shepherd, calling us by name and leading us out of fear, of danger, of threats from the wolves at the door (10:3).

Pilate, however, is not one who belongs to the truth. He doesn't listen to Jesus' voice. Rather, he shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "What is truth?" (18:38a) Hello, Pilate, the truth is standing right there in front of you. Remember, this, Pontius Pilate, Punchy (airline) Pilot--whose craft is off course-- Jesus said, "I am the way and THE TRUTH and the life" (14:6). Oh, you probably haven't read that part of the Gospel, have you, Pontius baby, Punchy baby? Well, it's true anyway. Even if you don't believe it.

Testify to the truth. Testify to the truth. That's not only Jesus' job; it's also the job of everyone who believes in his name (1:12). Just a few hours before Jesus stood before Pilate, Jesus stood before his disciples and said that they would be his witnesses, that they would be the ones to testify (15:27). They testify to the truth along with the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, the Comforter, the one-called-alongside (15:26).

Soon after predicting the coming of the Spirit, Jesus prays not only for the disciples that followed him during his earthly ministry; he also prays for all who believe in him (17:20). That includes us, whether in the eighteenth century or the 21st. We are his testifiers, his witnesses. We testify to the truth of God's love.

Jesus later appears as Risen from the dead, breathes on the disciples, and sends them out in the Spirit of peace to be witnesses (20:19-23). To testify. On Jesus' behalf. To the truth. What truth? The truth that God loves us, knows us deeply. Us, all of us. ALL means ALL. All persons, all parts of ourselves. Our past, our present, our future. Our words, our thoughts, our interactions with others. God loves us unconditionally, and, in our dealings with others and with ourselves, we testify to the truth of God's love for us.

We're testifying right now to the truth of God's love, through worship. We also testify through the many activities that this church has: First Church Academy for Young Children, John P. Webster Library, Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance (GHIAA), Covenant to Care, Loaves and Fishes, and ALL the other ministries of the church—outreach and inreach and every other kind of reach.

But we're testifying not only in church activities, but we're testifying in everything we do, when we're working and when we're resting, when we're eating and drinking, when we're talking to people, when we're wearing a mask or <gasp> not wearing a mask--even when we're angry with people, we are testifying to the truth of God's love. Yes, yes, friends, when we're in conflict, maybe especially when we're in conflict, we are testifying to God's love. While we're in conflict, it may be difficult for us to see, but all of us are acting out of love, and we are bearing witness to the truth of God's love.

I am continually impressed with the way that people in this church testify to God's love by loving others, both inside and outside the church. This week I've talked on the phone and in my office with several different folks who love this church. For example, I met with some church leaders, and I was so impressed with their love that I felt led to close the meeting with a prayer of

thanksgiving for the love that these people have demonstrated over the years—over the decades-- toward one another. Thanks be to God!

Does love mean, though, that there's not going to be conflict? NO! The opposite is the case: If you love each other deeply, passionately, there's going to be conflict. A church without conflict is a dead church. Conflict is a sign that a church--or any group--is alive.

In everything that we do, we testify to the truth that God loves us, knows us deeply. Some of us with gray hair may remember the TV show "Laugh-In" from the late 60s. In that show, Lily Tomlin played a number of characters, including Edith Ann, a five and a half-year old girl, who would say something philosophical from her huge rocking chair, then she would say, "And that's the truth!" and she would blow a raspberry. The raspberry was Edith Ann's "Amen" to her sermon.

In that spirit, let us go back to my thesis, and repeat it together. Afterward, I will say, "And all God's people said," And you will say, "Amen." (Or you can blow a raspberry). Let's practice. . . . Well done.

So, say it with me: We testify to the truth: God knows us, loves us deeply. And all God's people said, "Amen." Amen and amen. Let it be so. Let it be.

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