

Truth and Consequences
First Reading: Revelation 1:4b-8
Second Reading: John 18:33-38

It's time for us to play a game of *Complete the Movie Quote!* I'll offer a line from a classic movie, and you respond with the line that follows it, but here's the deal, you have to recite the line with the same voice and volume as the movie character. Okay, ready? "*I want the truth!*" ... "*You can't handle the truth!*"

Well, you are probably right about that. For any of us, the truth may be too much to bear. While most folks crave to know what people think about them, that craving is accompanied by the paralyzing terror that what people are saying isn't good, and if there has ever been something we humans passionately obsess over, it is the negative things people say about us. Give us a compliment and we may feel on top of the world for a day, but insult us behind our back, and we find out about it? Why, we'll chew on the bitterness of that for a lifetime. Perhaps Colonel Jessup, the Jack Nicholson character in *A Few Good Men*, was onto something. We can't handle the truth.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares the memory of a retreat she attended where the facilitator asked the group to share thoughts on the people who had most reflected Christ to them. Someone mentioned the grandparent who took them to Sunday School every Sunday. Someone spoke of the friend that stayed with her throughout her illness long after everyone else had faded away, consumed with their own lives. To be sure, the room was warmed with good feelings in the glow of those Christ encounters. But then, a woman in the back of the room stood up and said, with some reluctance, *“Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, ‘Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’”* (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*) With that, you could almost hear the oxygen escaping the room, like the hissing of a punctured tire.

“Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?” Truth is not always a welcome guest. Throughout life we expend great energy avoiding it, evading it, masking it, denying it, spinning it, or replacing it with falsehood. Remember George Costanza’s proverb? “Jerry, remember, it’s not a lie if you believe it.” That seems to have become the 1st Commandment for politicians and public figures today. Truth has no relevance in pursuit of an agenda or in the attempt to evade consequences.

Sometimes, we'll actually say we don't want to know the truth, because if we did, we'd have to do something about it; we'd have to get involved.

In Fredrik Backman's exquisite *Beartown* trilogy, a small-town's hockey hero is accused of assaulting a 15-year old girl, and the whole town rises up in self-righteous defense of the hockey prodigy. No one is willing to believe that their hero, upon whom rests all their hockey hopes, could ever be tainted by even the thought of such behavior.

So, almost immediately, a campaign of victim blaming begins. She must have lured him into this trap. She must have dressed too suggestively, thrown herself at him. Her house is vandalized. Her character is eviscerated online, claiming she's out to destroy the town. Her parents are harassed.

And the star escapes legal consequences, but consequences there will be, as one petrified junior hockey player stands up and speaks truth to power. He doesn't say what he heard, or what he thinks, but what he knows, and what he saw. Even that truth doesn't pierce all the way through the cloud of misinformation, but the glass house world of that small town was at least cracked a bit when the truth escaped the shackles of the lie that held it, and them, hostage.

Truth is, George Orwell didn't actually say this, but that does not diminish its relevance in 2024 — "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act." We fear telling or hearing the truth because of the cost we may have to pay for it. It is often easier to go along with the lie or shade the facts to our benefit. The idealists and dreamers say that truth will out, but will it, truly? In court, witnesses promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but can they, truly? Finite minds and the mixed motivations of the human spirit would indicate that our grasp of the truth will always be partial in this life.

Our faith tradition would echo this, trusting that the whole truth is not an idea, but is a person. John testified to it in the prologue to his gospel, *"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."* Jesus would confess, *"I am ... the truth."* In this same gospel, Jesus says, *"I am the light,"* and additionally, *"Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."*

Our reading for this Christ the King Sunday, also from John's Gospel, features the second stage of a trial. The defendant, a carpenter and itinerant rabbi from Nazareth has been arrested and shuffled back and forth between religious authorities who then pass him on to the Roman authorities, because while everybody wants the defendant dead, they'd rather have a degree or two of separation from the killing so that none of the blood winds up on their hands. *You take him ... No, you take him ... We want him dead but we're too pious to actually carry out the deed ... Who said anything about killing him? ... Well, we don't think Caesar would be too happy to hear that you were soft on crime, particularly when the crime is claiming the status of Caesar. He thinks he's the Son of God!*

In fact, the religious leaders so want to get rid of this Jesus, that they'll be willing to break the 1st Commandment to do so. What does the 1st Commandment say? *You shall have no other gods before me.* And what will the chiefs priests say to get rid of Jesus? *We have no king but the emperor.* Oh, how easily we abandon our ideals to get what we want. Of course, these days that seems as easy as flipping a light switch. Truth has less relevance to what you say than what you think you can sell. It doesn't matter what is true as long as your audience will buy it.

So, when confronted with the actual truth, about the world, about people, about your own veiled intentions, we want to hide it, discredit it, sweep it under the rug, or better yet, kill it.

Back in John 11, after Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life, the religious authorities called a meeting. The text reads, *“So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation’ ... So from that day on they planned to put him to death.”*

Well, they plotted and planned, and even went so far as to bribe a disciple named Judas to be a spy. How could they preserve the status quo of which they had been the beneficiaries? Like a political campaign, they did their opposition research and a plot evolved to get the Romans to do the dirty work for them. So, they arrest Jesus, rough him up a little bit and then deliver him to Pontius Pilate, the regional prelate for Rome. *“‘If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.’ The Jews replied, ‘We are not permitted to put anyone to death.’”*

For the religious authorities, this is a plot of self-preservation. For Pilate, it is just another mid-week headache, just one more helping of nuisance when his belly has already had more trouble than it can handle. Pilate is a politician, always trekking across thin ice, each step at risk of either catching rage from Rome or bellyaching from Bethlehem. Placate is always in bold letters on Pilate's agenda. He doesn't care who Jesus is, he just wants a problem to go away. As the drama continues, it will become obvious that Pilate's goal is *plausible deniability*, so he'll be washing his hands for the public as his soldiers try to sneak Jesus out the back door and plant him on cross outside the city wall, just another criminal on display as a warning to any who would consider resisting Roman rule.

"...Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'" Jesus knows the game being played here, the game of hot potato, with the potato being responsibility — *I don't want it. You take it.* *"Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'"* Though beaten and exhausted, you can imagine Jesus asking this with a side-eyed grin, because he knows Pilate is playing the odds like James Bond at the roulette table. As the embodiment of truth, Jesus exposes the cowardly mendacity of both Pilate and the religious

leaders. Truth is always unsettling, because we can never fully grasp it, never control it, certainly never own it, and as the old, old story will tell us, you can't kill it, either.

John presents to us the two most common human responses when confronted with the truth — Get rid of it, bury it as suggested by the woman at the church retreat (*“Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?”*) ... or, alternatively, like Pilate, our response to the truth is to try to work around it, spinning it to protect ourselves or others.

Get rid of it or work around it. The religious leaders demonstrate one and Pilate the other. In the theological statement, *A Declaration of Faith*, it says, *“In the presence of Jesus, who lived out what God wants us all to be, we were threatened beyond endurance. Blinded by our rebellion against our Creator, we killed his Son when we met him face to face.”*

We desperately seek to bury the truth or mask it, because we're afraid of what it will reveal about us. Yet, the great irony of history is that the truth we so fear to hear, is the same truth that is our redemption. For beneath all the masks and the mess, beneath all the insecurity and iniquity, the deepest

truth about ourselves ... is that we are loved. Jesus thought this truth to be worth dying for.

Jesus told Pilate, *“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.”* Pilate asked him, *“What is truth?”*

Theologians and Bible scholars have long debated the question of why Jesus didn't answer Pilate's question, but I'm with those like Frederick Buechner who would say that Jesus did answer Pilate's question. Pilate asks, *“What is truth?”* And Jesus just stands there. Jesus just stands there.

The deepest truth that you fear will undo you, the truth you fear will be too ugly to bear, the truth you may spend a lifetime denying? You are loved. May that truth set you free. Amen.