

**PILATE'S Q AND A; JOHN 18:33-37; CHRIST THE KING; NOVEMBER 22, 2015;  
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Truth seems to be up for grabs these days. A recent article in the *New York Times* reports that more than ever, the best available science seems incapable of changing minds. I cite this at the risk of suggesting that science is the arbiter and source of truth which in one regard concerning the physical description and function of the material world – it is; but which in other matters – not the ‘how’ but the ‘why’ of life and the life of the spirit, it is not.

There does seem to be a kind of psychological immune response in which many reject ideas they consider harmful regardless of objective proof; subjective feelings are trusted over scientific expertise.

Viewed from afar, George Johnson writes, the world seems almost on the brink of conceding that there are no truths, only competing ideologies – narratives fighting narratives. The bluster of presidential candidates taking positions in the extreme and in opposition to one another and the rise and fall of their popularity polls is an example.

In this war of ideas those with the most power allegedly impose their version of reality on the rest, leaving those who are weaker to fight back with formulations of their own. Everything becomes a version.

Johnson goes on, the widening gyre of beliefs is accelerated by the otherwise liberating Internet. At the same time it expands the reach of every mind, it channels debate into clashing memes – memes are ideas, behaviors and styles that catch on from person to person within a culture – often in arguments no longer than 140 characters that force people to extremes and traps them in self-reinforcing bubbles of thought.

In the end, it's easy to wonder if we are confined to a bubble ourselves; some powerful paradigm called science or traditional medicine or big-corporation capitalism, seduced by our own delusions.<sup>i</sup>

I'd like to explore today the Gospel of John's remarkable exchange between Pilate and Jesus in which Jesus says, "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." Then Pilate's haunting question, "What is truth?"

While the circumstances that blur credibility today are different from the circumstances in which Pilate – a sophisticated and educated leader – found himself uncertain about truth, the problem his question points to is the same as the one we wrestle with – the relationship of power to truth.

Pilate who thinks he has power, in fact has little, and the power he does have – to put Jesus to death – will be overturned. Jesus, who appears utterly powerless, is the only one who knows where power comes from and what it means.

We can see how the interplay of power and truth is at work in our world today: Black Lives Matter, for example, began as a hashtag on Twitter postings; a hashtag is a way of categorizing a word or idea in social media.

The Black Lives Matter hashtag was a response to the prominent police killings of blacks in the past year; it has since morphed from an online marker to an Internet-driven civil rights movement with real people organizing in real cities, not just people following a meme. Today, dozens of groups are associated with a larger movement under the same name, including the organization founded by the activists who created the hashtag.

Yet amid their differing approaches is a swirl of increasing political activity. Local Black Lives Matter affiliates have disrupted numerous Democratic presidential campaign events, pushing candidates to support policies to end mass incarceration and police brutality, the recent resignation of the president of the University of Missouri was the result of Black Lives Matter organizing.

What the Black Lives Matter hashtag and organizing represents is the power of moral/ethical truth. The speed with which the organization, or organizations, because there are many local affiliates embracing the goal of racial justice, tailoring their work to local issues; the speed with which Black Lives Matter materialized was due to the power of the internet but also to the wide appeal of their call for justice.<sup>ii</sup>

What I am saying as we work our way back to answer Pilate's question "What is truth?" is that moral truth, truth that responds to the innate consciousness we each have within us that knows the right thing to do – which is not to say that it is sometimes vexing and difficult to figure out the right thing to do – moral truth is more powerful than political power because moral truth never gives up, never dies, never stops sending the call for justice.

Garry Wills historian and political commentator illustrates the point. On the morning Martin Luther King, Jr was shot Wills flew to Memphis and went to the funeral home where Dr. King's body was being prepared for burial. Only one other journalist sat in the funeral home's lobby while Black morticians worked through the night on Dr. King's body, damaged by gunshot wounds. On the Black radio station the morticians were playing, King's live voice was audible, giving speech after speech. When the body was brought out, the journalists viewed it before the funeral home manager pinned gauze over the top of the coffin. It was the first time Wills had seen Dr. King in person. "I thought he was dead," Wills remembers thinking, "but I was wrong."<sup>iii</sup>

Even though years of progress have resulted in a growing black middle class and opportunities for high achieving black children; not to mention electing a black president, racial injustice for poor blacks and profiling of all blacks continues.

The Black Lives Matter movement has ended what seems like an era of quietude on racial matters.

The moral truth which the Black Lives Matter movement has claimed turns on a dime and empowers those who appear powerless.

In the Prague demonstration that sparked the Czech revolution on November 18, 1989, students began chanting to the Communist party leadership, "You have lost already! You have lost already!" – though victory was still in the future.

The same thing happened in Romania before the fall in the same year of the state dictator Nicolae Ceausescu who had built a mansion in Bucharest second in size and square feet only to the Pentagon. One hundred and three members of the Reformed Church of Romania – the Presbyterians of Eastern Europe – encircled, arm in arm, the home of their pastor who started the revolution with his preaching; they protected him from the police who came to arrest him but, reading the tea leaves, decided to leave empty handed. "We began to understand that victory was ours," they said, "each day we took another step forward. In the end the outcome was no surprise."

Biblical scholar/activist Walter Wink said, "moral truth and justice does not wait for God's sovereignty to be established on earth; it behaves as if that sovereignty already holds full sway. The early Christians, like the psalmists and prophets before them, declared what was fact only in the imagination. Faith calls into being what does not yet exist and races ahead to form something new that never was. To say that God defeats the forces of death in our world is ludicrous if that praise is heard descriptively, but if it evokes a new reality just beginning to come into being, then it helps create that new reality in the only way it can be created."<sup>iv</sup>

Marilynne Robinson in her new, acclaimed collection of essays titled, *The Givenness of Things* offers an understanding of truth far more grand, eloquent and fitting for our self-understanding and our understanding of the natural world and cosmos than the limited, if accurate, results of scientific experiments.

Robinson sees this truth as all encompassing, as the fount of creative energy from which the world and creation were envisioned and came into being; this truth, she says, is rooted in the opening lines of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word"; all things came from and were created by this Word or Logos who was also Christ the one who walked among us as the Son of God. Logos, truth, wisdom – out of which creation is envisioned and made. When Jesus says to Thomas, later in John, and before the encounter with Pilate, "I am the way, the truth and the life" he links himself, equates himself with the creative life force of the cosmos.

Here is Calvin on the subject: "When the Scripture speaks of the Word of God, of Logos, it is absurd to imagine it to be only a transient and momentary sound, emitted into the air; the Word of God is rather to be understood of the eternal wisdom residing in God, whence the biblical oracles and all prophecies proceed." And here is Robinson on Calvin, "For him the very sinews of reality are made of the wisdom proceeding from this source; the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are an aspect of this wisdom, this truth."<sup>v</sup>

So what does all this have to do with Pilate's question, "What is truth?" and with Christ the King Sunday?

What Jesus ministry and kingdom affirm and what Pilate has yet to experience and embrace is the truth that attests to the uniform and cohesive nature of reality; a truth that is descriptive of both the physical and moral universe as well as the spiritual realm.

That is why the singers of justice in every generation – prophets and apostles and martyrs, those who have been touched and healed, those who have seen and believed – that is why they cannot help but join their voices with the heavenly choirs singing, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah and he shall reign for ever and ever."

In these terror-riddle times with claims of half-truths and abuses of power it helps to remember those who faced similar evils in their day; like Allan Boesak who told anti-apartheid demonstrators that South Africa's apartheid system had fallen.

"The battle is won, even though it is not yet over," he would say.

"It drives the dragon, crazy," he testified, "when you sing about his downfall even though you are bleeding."

What is truth? Poet Mark Doty who was just here for the annual Silverman lecture at the Butler Mansion has a poem about listening to his local choral society perform the Messiah;

The great oratorio by Handel for King George is what today, Christ the King Sunday, and the truth to which Jesus came to testify and what the longing in Pilate's heart are about:

This music/Demonstrates what it claims;  
Glory shall be revealed. If art is/acceptable evidence,  
Mustn't what lies/behind the world be at least  
as beautiful as the human voice?/The tenors lack confidence,  
And the soloists, /half of them anyway, don't  
have the strength to found/the mighty kingdoms  
These passages propose/--but the chorus, all together,  
equals my burning clouds,/and seems itself to burn,  
commingled powers/deeded to a larger, centering claim.  
These aren't anyone we know;/choiring dissolves  
familiarity in an up-/pouring rush which will not  
rest, will not, for a moment,/ be still.  
Aren't we enlarged/by the scale of what we're able  
to desire?/Everything,/the choir insists,  
Might flame;/inside these wrappings  
Burns another, brighter life, quickened now,  
by song: hear how/it cascades, in overlapping,  
lapidary waves of praise? Still time./Still time to change.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> George Johnson, “The Gradual Extinction of Accepted Truths,” Raw Data, *The New York Times*, August 25, 2015, D6.

<sup>ii</sup> John Eligon, “Black Lives Matters Seeks Political Voice From the Din of Protest,” *The New York Times*, Thursday, November 19, 2015, A1.

<sup>iii</sup> Garry Wills, *Pulpit Resource*, September to December, 2015, 36.

<sup>iv</sup> William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, September to December, 2015, 36.

<sup>v</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2015) 141ff.