

I

When my name was called, I stood up, raised my right hand, and made a solemn oath that the testimony that I was about to give before the court was true.

One of the saints of the church that I served had died, and as his pastor, I was asked by the attorney handling his estate to give testimony at a probate hearing because I was someone who knew the deceased well, but I had no personal interest in the estate, so I could give sworn testimony that to the best of my knowledge, the deceased had no other heirs other than those named before the court. The whole thing was short and simple, and it took no more than five or ten minutes.

But it was the first time in my life I'd ever been asked to give sworn testimony in a courtroom, and as I stood before the bench, my heart was racing, my palms were sweaty, and when the judge, a very kind woman, asked me a simple question, I responded, "Yes sir, I mean, yes ma'am."

II

But when you stop and think about it, all of us testify in our everyday lives without even thinking about it. It may not always be in a court of law, but whenever describe to another person something that we've personally experienced, when we confess what we believe to be true about that experience, that's testimony. And we do it all the time.

When we tell our neighbor about an experience we had with a painter or a landscaper or a roofer, whether that experience was good, bad, or neutral, we're giving testimony.

When we tell another student about an experience with a class we took or a teacher we had, we're giving our testimony.

When we tell a coworker about a new lunch spot we found, or when we tell a friend about the place we traveled to over the weekend, or when we post a review about something on social media – all of that is a form of testimony. We are describing a personal experience and confessing what we believe to be true about that experience.

Experience. Confession. Truth. All of these are at the heart of the story before us in John's gospel this morning.

III

This winter, we've been reading and preaching our way through the gospel according to John. We started with Chapter 1, verse 1, right after Christmas, and though we haven't gone verse by verse, we left off in chapter 14 last week. When we left the story last week, Jesus and the disciples were once again in Jerusalem for the holy day of Passover. Jesus knew that his hour was drawing near, and so he gathered in the upper room with those whom he loved and began to share with his disciples what scholars commonly call his "Farewell Discourse," which takes up all

of chapters 14, 15, and 16 of John's gospel.

Today, we're moving ahead in the story. Between where we left off last week and where we pick up the story today, Jesus and the disciples have left the upper room and made their way across town to a garden, where one of the disciples, Judas, was waiting with a detachment of both Roman soldiers and Temple police.

The soldiers and police arrested Jesus and first brought him to Caiaphas, the high priest. After a short inquiry Caiaphas the high priest sent Jesus in chains to stand trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

And that is where we pick up our story for today. So listen now for a Word from God from John 18:28–40.

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "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." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" 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?" 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." 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." 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. 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?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

This is the Word of God before the people of God. Thanks be to God.

About the year 26 AD, the Roman Empire sent Pontius Pilate to serve as Governor of the territory of their empire that included Jerusalem and the surrounding lands.

But while Pontius Pilate held the title of governor, he was not bound by any kind of system of checks and balances. In Judea, Pontius Pilate was the voice of Rome. When he spoke, it was with the full force and effect of the entire empire.

And that's what makes this conversation between Jesus and Pilate so fascinating to me.

Because on the one hand, here's Pilate, dressed in his Roman uniform, the very personification of the most powerful empire the world has ever known. At his command is a garrison of the finest and fiercest troops in the world. Outside of the Roman Emperor himself, there is no one in the land with more military, economic, and political power and wealth at his disposal than Pontius Pilate.

And on the other hand, here's Jesus, whose clothes are dirty and rumpled from spending the night in custody, who probably has a little dried blood on his collar from when the Temple police roughed him up. If he had any money with him, it was almost certainly taken from him when he was arrested.

He has no officers standing at the ready, awaiting his orders. Simon Peter has denied three times that he ever even met him. And just outside the headquarters, Jesus can hear the voices of those demanding that he be killed post haste.

Jesus and Pilate, when taken together, paint two different portraits of kingship.

One leader who leads with the tools of spear and sword. The other who leads with the tools of bread, wine, and water, who kneels before his subordinates and washes their feet.

One man who represents an empire built on fear, intimidation, and strict adherence to social rules that are clear about who is worthy of honor and who is not. The other who represents a kingdom built on self-emptying love, where tax collectors and sinners and others who have been deemed undesirable are welcomed and offered the best seat at the table, a kingdom where there is always enough to go around.

Here are these two men, side by side. Jesus, bound awaiting the judgment of Pontius Pilate.

But I wonder. I wonder who exactly it is that is on trial here?

I wonder if, the picture that John is painting is one of God's judgment over all of our earthly notions of kingship.

My kingdom is not of this world, says Jesus, and I have come to testify to the truth.

And Pontius Pilate, the one who represents all the power and might in the world, responds, "What is truth?"

IV

Here's the truth, my friend. In life and in death, is that you belong, body and soul, not to the empires and kingdoms of this world, not to any corporation or party or ideology, not to your family, not even to yourself. The truth is that you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ,

He has paid fully for all your sins with his precious blood and has set you free from evil. He watches over you so closely that not a hair can fall from your head without the will of God in heaven, and all things work together for your salvation.

You belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to Jesus, not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, not because of any prayer you've said or sacrament or rite of the church you've received. You belong because you are loved more deeply and fiercely than you or I will ever understand.

The truth is that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death.

That is, as we say in the business, gospel truth.

So my friend, will you testify to that truth? It's one thing to do it in here, when you're surrounded by your friends in faith. But will you testify to that truth when you reach those doors? Will you testify to that truth when you come face to face with the fallen powers of this

world? Will you testify to the truth in the school lunchroom or the school lockerroom? Will you testify to that truth in the conference room? When it's just you, standing before the powers of this world this week, what will your testimony be?

V

And what about us, as a community of faith? What about we who live out our discipleship in Jesus together in this thing we call the church?

Someone asked me the other day if I worry that Sunday worship attendance won't rebound as the pandemic eases, and I said to them, in all seriousness, the very fact that people show to church at all is a miracle and a gift to be celebrated with abandon.

Given all the other things y'all could be doing this morning with your time, given the hassle it is to get up, to get yourselves dressed, and God help you if you've got children you have to get dressed, too, to get yourselves downtown and sit on these hard wooden pews, or even just to take the time to tune into our online worship, when you could be spending that time online doing a million other things – the fact that ya'll are here at all is a miracle and a gift to be celebrated with wild abandon.

But the truth is, the fact that y'all are here, the fact that y'all are tuned in, makes you a little weird, at least compared to your friends and family who chose to do other things with their time.

And I suspect that they're wondering about y'all, at least sometimes. They know that ya'll are here. They know that y'all make some big claims about this man named Jesus.

But I don't think they're looking at y'all and wondering is the gospel story true – at least not true in the same sense that $2+2 = 4$ is true or that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit is true.

I think they're asking, "Does this story about Jesus make any discernable difference at all in the words and actions of those who claim it as gospel truth?"

They're listening to your testimony, my friend, more carefully and attentively than you may realize. They're listening to the words you speak, and also to your silence. They're observing the choices you make about the dollars and cents that are in your control. They're reading your social media posts. They're watching how you drive. They're paying attention to how you speak to and about those who the powers of this world have deemed undesirable and unworthy and less than.

And they're not asking, "Is the gospel true?" They're asking, "Does it make a difference?"

They're very familiar with the values and ethics of Pontius Pilate. They see them at work every day in the marketplace.

But I think they're looking at us, my friends, and they're not just curious – they're hungry. They're hungry for the church to be the church – for us to

testify not just with our mouths, but with our whole lives, that there is more to this world than what you can see, hold, and buy, that phrases like might makes right and the one who dies with the most toys wins – those are lies. They're longing for a different kind of kingdom, with a different kind of king, a king whose kingdom is not of this world.

For this he was born, and for this he came into the world – to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice.

May it be so for us this day.
Thanks be to God. Amen.