

Sermon for Sunday, November 20, 2016

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Colossians 1:15-23

It's official: according to the powers that be of the *Oxford Dictionaries*, the word of the year 2016 is "post-truth." They define the word as "relating or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs." If we actually live in such a day and age, where facts do not matter anymore and everybody can just make things up according their feelings, we are in deep trouble. The current host of CBS *Late Show*, Stephen Colbert, turned out to be prophetic in his mock news show *The Colbert Report* on October 17, 2005, when he coined the word "truthiness." Essentially it means the same thing. "Truthiness" is what we wish were true, what our gut demands to be true, rather than what evidence, logic, intellectual scrutiny, and facts tell us. What started out as a joke has become reality.

Paired with our "post-truth" age, social media has helped brew a toxic cocktail. In no time at all it is now possible to whip people into a global frenzy without any fact-checking whatsoever. If it's on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, or *Instagram*, it must be true. While traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television news—remember those?—are not without their own issues, they have at least gatekeepers, editors, who make sure that the reported news is responsible. On the Internet, however, it's a free-for-all.

I recently had a conversation with a friend who pastors a small church in a rural area. "Mike" is one of the most faithful people I know. He is thoroughly committed to Christ and his Church. He told me that if he could find another job to pay his bills and put his three kids through school, he would quit the ministry right now. This rattled me. When I asked him why, he said one of the members of the church he serves came into his office and tore into him because of something he preached. Mike invited this person to discuss the issue and showed him the passage in the New Testament, which he had quoted verbatim in his sermon. The man told him: "You are wrong. You are just wrong. I know it." The evidence was right there on the printed pages of the Bible. It didn't matter. "Truthiness, post-truth" has arrived.

Any of this, however is nothing new. In the aftermath of the *Enlightenment*, the church in Europe and the public discourse were also governed by emotion rather than empirical fact. This climate proved fertile ground for authoritarian leaders and regimes to seize their opportunity. What followed was a world thrust into chaos for generations to come. If you read my *Chapel Bell* article last week, you already know that in 1925 Pope Pius XI instituted *Christ the King Sunday*, which we are celebrating today, in response to the rise of such virulent secularism.

We can go even further back in time with the apostle Paul and his hymn to the primacy and supremacy of Christ, which he preached to the faithful in Colossae more than two-thousand years ago. Different time, different geographical location, same issue. Just as we read in the opening verses of John's Gospel, Paul asserts that "in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created ... whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things."

Along with the apostle Paul, *Christ the King Sunday* reminds Christians around the world that we do not elect Christ—Christ elects us. As it is aptly named in our liturgy, Christ is not our

leader-elect. He is our King. He is, as the early church confessed, “Christus Pantokrator,” the Anointed One of God who reigns over all things. No earthly leader is capable of saving us. Only Christ is and does.

If I were forced to bow to the conventions of social media and tweet my sermon today, I would tweet this: “Jesus Christ is Lord. Everything else is commentary.” I’d even have 100 characters to spare. However, Jesus can never be captured on a bumper sticker or a *Tweet*. Jesus can only be followed and his message can only be lived. Paul reminds us today that our faith in Christ has nothing to do with emotion or how we feel about Jesus. There is no place for “truthiness” when it comes to Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaims in Matthew’s Gospel that anyone can say “Lord, Lord,” without it meaning a thing. Only doing the will of God is what matters: feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, holding on to that which is good, rendering no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, comforting the sick and the dying, loving and serving the Lord by the power of God’s Holy Spirit that lives in each person—each person. Or, as Paul wrote, Christ’s life, death, and resurrection present us as people holy and blameless before God—“provided that you continue to be securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.”

Before Pilate condemned Jesus, he raised this question: “What is truth?” To which John’s Gospel has Jesus answer: “I am the truth.” Truth, according to the good news, is not something I get to decide. It is not an opinion. It is not an emotion. It is a person. Our stewardship theme this year expresses a clear understanding of the lordship of Christ. “Uniting in faith” is the proper and faithful Christian response of all who would follow Christ and claim Christ’s promises which we all received in our baptism. By uniting in faith, we live into these promises and participate in God’s vision for all creation: wholeness, peace, and life together in community. Anything short of that denies the lordship of the “one who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).” When Jesus was crucified between two thieves, Luke’s text tells us that “many just stood by watching.” Paul won’t have any of that. Being a Christian, he says, is a contact sport ... well, that’s a loose translation. In other words, for disciples of Christ, simply standing by, watching, is not an option. It never has been, it never will be.

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