

Do You Belong?
John 18:33-37

If you're a parent, then you know all about being peppered with questions, especially when the kids are little.

Some little tykes want to know where the moon goes in the morning, or how God made them. One child wanted to know if his mom had to stay indoors when she was little during COVID-1 through COVID-18.

One mother was startled when her 5-year-old son asked her where poo came from. Being a good and honest mom, she provided a reasonably simple and accurate response, but one that also alluded to certain gastro-intestinal functions. The child was stunned and perplexed, but then asked, "And Tigger, too?" One can only imagine how the poor child thought his mom might answer that question.

Children are curious about themselves and their ever-expanding world. So, they ask questions. It is natural for them to turn to their parents because they're usually the primary — if not only — source for the truth. According to one source, parents can expect to get almost 500 questions per child from their offspring. That number probably went up during the Covid-19 crisis, when many kids were at home 24/7 with their parents.

We're now approaching the season when parents can expect to hear the number one question kids ask: "Is Santa real?"

Today's gospel lesson is well-known for a question. Like "Is Santa real?", it is also a three-word question. But, inexplicably, it's technically not in our reading, which concludes with verse 37. The question appears in verse 38. But it is part of the dialogue, so we need to consider it. It is a three-word question? "What is truth?"

This question is not asked by a 6-year-old, but by Jesus' interrogator, Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator who had been hectoring that morning by his wife Procula to wash his hands of this Jesus fellow: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him" (Matthew 27:19).

But Pilate took a different course. He washed his hands of the whole affair — literally: "When Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves'" (Matthew 27:24).

What Is Truth?

If you're a kid, you might venture an answer. It is noteworthy that there is no evidence that Jesus responded to the proconsul's question, and have to figure that if Jesus — King of Kings, Lord of

lords, present at creation and in whom the fullness of God dwelt bodily — didn't tackle this question, maybe it's best left alone. Granted, Jesus had a lot on his plate right then. You can't blame him for saying, "Hey, can we do this another time?"

You could argue that this "What is truth?" question is the most important question to ask. But learned men and women have asked other important questions. Pilate asked "What?" but maybe the big question is "Why?" Or, even bigger, "Why not?"

Many of the "big questions" like Pilate's are philosophical. What is reality? What is the meaning of life? Why am I here? What is love? These are good questions, and it doesn't hurt to ask them, since it is probably true — according to an ancient Chinese proverb — that "he who asks a question remains a fool for five minutes, whereas he who does not is a fool for life."

Rather than remaining a fool for life and preferring to be judged by our questions rather than our answers, let's pose a different query than "What is truth?" Why? Because, honestly, we know the answer to that question. We can stipulate our answer and move on.

By "we," I mean Christians. We know the truth. It is embodied in our faith. We certainly would not say that we don't know the truth, would we? So, we know the truth.

But what truth? There is the truth about justice, freedom, love, happiness, and life. But, let's face it, the "truth" about these values is pliable in the hands of those of different life experiences. Everyone, it seems, has their own truth, and it is for that truth that they go on some talk show and yell and holler.

This happens because most people forget the distinction between truth as verifiable facts, and truth as non-verifiable but eternal verities that form the basis for all moral and ethical ideas.

The problem with the first type of truth is that it requires human observation. We observe that water boils at 212 degrees and that apples are either red or green. These are true statements. But too often, our observations are informed by many sociological factors that color how we interpret the facts or "truths" we believe. As C.S. Lewis notes, his truth about New York is one thing, but the truth about New York as expressed by an actual New Yorker is quite another.

People have their truths. They're going to believe what they believe. And it can be pretty wild stuff: Black helicopters, QAnon, UFOs, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, the New World Order and that Denver International Airport sits atop of a vast underground complex of this New World Order. These "truths" abound.

Understanding truth as facts is also why Hamas launches rockets at Israel and why Israel conducts airstrikes over Gaza; why bipartisanship is so difficult in Congress, why the divorce rate is so high, and so on.

We believe that truth consists of the facts we're holding in our hands. When nations believe in a

conflicting aggregation of facts, they're sitting on a potential powder keg. It's true on a smaller scale as well. As someone noted, perhaps H.L. Mencken, there's no more dangerous person than one with the calm assurance that he is in possession of the truth.

The truth in which Christians believe is articulated in Holy Scriptures. It is not verifiable in an empirical sense perhaps, unless you argue that faith is a sort of sixth sense. For it is *sola fide*, as Martin Luther so eloquently insisted, that allows us to grasp and belong to the truth about which Jesus is talking. That truth, simply put, is the truth about God, the truth of God and that God is the truth.

That sounds just as fuzzy and pliable as the Hallmark mentality expressed on a Valentine card. But it's not. And to get a handle on this truth about God, godly men and women have worked hard to creedalize this truth, and it goes something like this: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son Our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried ...

Every time we recite the Credo, we're simply affirming that we believe in the truth, that we know the truth, and that it is around this truth that we order our lives.

But do we? Is this truth the truth around which we order our lives? Is this truth the foundation upon which our lives rest?

Let's return to the words of Jesus to Pilate, to which Pilate responded, "What is truth?" Jesus had just said to him, "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."

The stipulation on the table is that we know the truth. Let's move on.

What we do not know is whether we belong to it.

The critical question to pose now is this: "Do we belong to the truth?" Jesus said that if we belong to the truth, we listen to his voice. Do we belong to the truth?

It seems fitting to respond to this question by asking more questions.

Do we belong to our truth or God's truth? Many Christians belong to God's truth when they're in church one day of the week. They recite the creed, they say the Lord's Prayer, sing a hymn or mumble a praise and worship tune, give a few dollars to the church's general fund, and call it good.

The rest of the week they live according to their own truth. So apparently, it's okay to be rude to the wait staff, ignore the needy, watch porn, be unfaithful to your marriage vows, destroy the environment, or ignore your kids. People who fit this description clearly belong to their own

truth, not God's truth.

A similar question: Do we belong to the truth or do we live and act as if the truth belongs to us? How we answer that question will determine the choices we make, the priorities we establish, the words we speak, and the actions we take. If we believe the truth belongs to us, then we're truth-shifters, those who shape the truth to make it fit their version of reality or to justify their ungodly or anti-social behavior.

To whom do you listen? Jesus said those who belong to the truth listen to his voice — like the sheep who know the voice of the shepherd, or a child who can distinguish the voice of her mother out of a crowd of mothers. When we're off doing whatever we want to, to whose voice are we listening? Sometimes we are like many adolescents. They insist they know what they're doing, that they really love mom and dad, but they listen to their own counsel or to the advice of their peers — sometimes with tragic results — rather than the voice of their parents.

When we make ourselves custodians of the truth, when we believe that the truth belongs to us, we listen to our own voice and the voices of those who think and act like us. We listen to the voice of our political party, our country, our religion, our faction. We listen to the voice of our fear and insecurity. We listen to the voice of our prejudice, our individual needs and desires, our experience.

Are we seriously willing to conform our lifestyle (our behavior, ethics, values) to the teachings of the Bible? It is always a good thing to ask this question. Sometimes a satellite or spaceship slips out of orbit, and it needs a boost to return to the correct orbital pathway. Sometimes, wellness requires regular, if not frequent, checkups. So, you visit your health care professional. She tells you that you need to modify your lifestyle. You need to turn over a new leaf.

Now is that time for us. It is Christ the King Sunday.

Is Jesus Lord, or isn't he?

Do we listen to his voice, or our own?

Do we belong to God's truth, or our own?

These are questions we need to ask ourselves. Next week we begin our preparations for Christ's coming. And we will be hearing a lot of different voices, each calling us to follow them as the true way to prepare for Jesus—some false, some true. Only by belonging to God's truth will we be able to discern between the two. Amen