

“Caught In-Between”
John 18:33-38a, II Samuel 23:1-7
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“What is truth?”

Let’s return to our apple. Or rather, let’s look at this new one—a different one from the one I used with the kids. This is a nice, big, red apple. It is red all over, same in back as it is in front. Can we all agree that this apple is red? So, that’s a true statement then, right? This apple is red. This apple matches our collective definition of *red*; and philosophers say that truth can be established when something *corresponds* to a common standard: what’s called correspondence theoryⁱ. We don’t simply believe the apple is red, we know it to be red because we also know what *red* looks like.

So, is this an *example* of truth?

But wait, the National Institute of Health reports that 8% of men and .5% of women in America, with Northern European ancestry, are color blindⁱⁱ. That means that it is likely that for at least one person in this congregation, this apple might not be red. If you were to ask this person what color the apple is, they might say that it is green. That’s the way this person experiences it.

So, are they wrong? What is true?

Well, we might say that there is something wrong with their perception. There is something amiss with the retinal cones that perceive color through light and the wrong information is being transmitted to the optic nerve. So, while everyone else **knows** this is a red apple, this person might have to choose to **believe** us that the apple is red. Then we can all agree—including the person who is colorblind—that

the apple is red and this is a true statement...right?

Well...not so fast...what if, for argument's sake, we were all born color-blind? What if all of us saw this as a *green* apple? How would we know any different? We would all stand in solidarity that this apple is green because there would be no one to tell us otherwise. We then *believe* the apple to be green, we might even tell ourselves that we **know** the apple to be green because—although we don't know it—we just can't detect the color red. So what is true then? Is the apple still red? Many of you are saying or thinking yes, and I'd be inclined to agree with you.

But wait! How do we know that we *aren't* all limited in our color perception?

We humans use three color-receptors to see the spectrum of light: red, green or blue. The eye sends the signals from the receptors to the brain, which in turn perceives a color. But then I remembered once hearing that humans and other vertebrates don't have the most sophisticated color perception. The show Radiolabⁱⁱⁱ on NPR once did a show on this and it was there that I learned that butterflies can have as many as five receptors. And the one creature found to have the highest perception of color is something called the Mantis Shrimp which is so colorful that it is positively iridescent. The mantis shrimp has 16 color receptors which makes the spectrum of its rainbow far exceed that which the human eye can detect. So, how would the mantis shrimp see the color of this apple? Probably not red. Probably something far more exotic and vibrant than the reddest of apples we've seen.

So...what color is it? We were so sure it was red before. But now we ask with less certainty: what is true?

Or maybe you're thinking that color (or truth for that matter) is in the eye of the beholder? Isaac Newton^{iv} was perhaps the first to put forth this question about color—wondering if color was more of an inner perception than an outer manifestation.

The problem of course is that our perspective shapes our definition of truth. What we perceive as real or as true may not be what someone else perceives as real or true. That's the issue between us and the Mantis Shrimp. That's the issue that in our "post-modern" world we sometimes hear described as "what's true for me may not be what's true for you." Does each of us have our own truths, depending on how we experience the world? Is there no objective truth that we all agree on? Is truth elusive, can it ever be pinned down?

I used to love questions like that. Of course that was back when I was 21, had a beard and longer hair, and smoked a pipe like all philosophy majors were supposed to in college—it was the seventies. We would sit around and debate about whether Plato or Aristotle were right in their conception of truth and reality. Were there such things as beauty and goodness, or were they just conceptions that had some mutual agreement but no objective reality? And what is truth, anyway? Is there such a thing as truth? Is it the same for you as it is for me? Or does truth depend on the observer? Is my truth the same as yours?

That's the problem for Pilate when he asks: *What is Truth?* He has some set ideas of what is true and what is not. Pilate is the prefect of Judea. It is his job, first and foremost, to keep the peace. If there are riots, if things get out of hand, the Emperor in Rome might hear about it and that would not be a good thing. Keep the peace and keep the taxes flowing—whatever else these silly religious people might want to do was up to them. So, on the Feast of Passover, when some of the chief priests bring to him someone they have arrested for blasphemy, what does he care? He is not interested in their

religious rules, but when they say that he is calling himself the “King of the Jews,” well, that peaks his interest. There is only one King, one ruler, the Emperor Tiberius in Rome. Anyone challenging his authority was not going to be long for this world, so the first question that Pilate asks Jesus is, “Are you the King of the Jews?” If Jesus had said, “yes,” it would have been over right then and there. But he doesn't. He says, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Well, what does that mean? At first Pilate is relieved. If he's not really a king, then he is no threat to Rome and no problem for Pilate. But Jesus seems to hint that he is a king. So Pilate asks, “So, you *are* a king?” Jesus doesn't seem to be political, not what Pilate had assumed him to be. But the crowd outside is yelling and for them this is political. Why is this man such a big problem? Why are the religious leaders so upset? If he is not a real king, if he has no real armies, no visible followers from what Pilate can tell, what's the big deal? What is true? But, then again, there is that “keeping the peace” thing. If there is a riot or any upset over this, Rome is bound to hear about it. But really, what kind of king can this Jesus be?

Jesus finally answers, “I came to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.” What does that mean? Truth? What is that? The truth that Pilate knows is power, imperial military political power. What else is there? Is there something else?

“What is truth?” he asks, and gets no answer.

But picture this: when Pilate asks, “What is truth?” does he ask, “What *is* truth?” in a dismissive way, expecting no answer, because no one has an answer? Philosophers have debated this for centuries and will debate it more for centuries to come and no one comes up with a final answer. If truth is just an agreed upon definition for things, then it keeps changing and maybe there is no final truth.

Or maybe Pilate says scornfully, “*What* is truth?” How in the world would you know? He might be

thinking Jesus is just a nobody from Backwoods, Galilee. Where does he get off trying to define truth to a prefect of the Roman Empire?

But maybe...just maybe...he senses something different in this man. Maybe Pilate thinks this man might have something that he needs, something that he has been looking for. So perhaps Pilate asks with a little bit of hope in his voice, "What is truth?" But alas, he gets no answer. Or does he?

When I showed the apple to the kids, they saw that the apple was red, but then they saw that the apple was yellow. But it was the same apple, it just depended on how you were looking at it. I heard a wise man say recently that our expectations shape our experience. And maybe one of the lessons we take from today's scripture is just that: our expectations shape our experience. Jesus did not fit what Pilate knew was the definition of a king. To him, "king" meant a person with military, political power. A king was not a poor, itinerant preacher and healer from some small town that no one had ever heard of. A king commanded armies, a king commanded respect, a king was not deserted by his rag-tag followers, and then arrested and beat up by a bunch of priests. Pilate was caught in between what his preconceived notion of reality was and the actual experience. The question, "So, you are a king?" may be one of incredulity. He can't believe how far this ragged person is from his definition of what a king should be. He is caught between his experience of what a king is, like the emperor in Rome, and what is in front of him now.

Isn't that just as true for us? What do we do when our experience doesn't match what we have always thought to be true? We experience *cognitive dissonance* (as another wise man in this congregation likes to say). Do we then just walk away, clinging to the old and refusing to accept new ideas? It's not just someone having a different idea of a red apple, but what if someone has a different idea of God than we do? Are they wrong and we are right? How do we know? Are we all destined to be different?

I read a quote this week that said “The lamps might be different, but the light is the same.”^v I think I read it in my newsfeed on Facebook and there was no one to who the quote was credited, nor was a context given for its meaning. But I interpreted it as an observation about God and the variety of world religions. “Our lamps might be different but the light is the same.” Do we all see the same morning light that Steve read about from King David? Don’t we all, no matter who we are or where live see the same light? Or maybe we forget that because we keep looking at the differences in our lamps?

We come to church to find answers about God. To find the truth. Isn’t that why we have all these sermons and education classes, so we can get answers to our questions about God and truth and the world? Isn’t that why we read the Bible, so we can find truth?

If there is one thing that we are discovering in this upsetting age of ours—I hope—it is that truth comes not just from commonly held definitions, but in the encounter with another. I hope we come to church not just to learn about God, or to get answers to questions but to encounter God—in holy relationship. I hope that we have somehow felt that when we are together, when we are at worship or in a class or sharing a meal with each other, or serving the poor with our blue t-shirts on, that we experienced that catching of the breath, or the quickening beat of the heart, or that peace of spirit, or even the occasional tear, that is as close to truth as we can come, because it is an encounter with the Spirit of God. Truth comes in the encounter.

That’s where Pilate comes up short. He’s caught in-between his preconceived notion of what a king is and the reality standing in front of him—his personal encounter with God. So he asks, what is truth? And he doesn’t get an answer. Or maybe he does. Maybe his answer is standing there in front of him. Maybe truth is standing right there. Truth is not an explanation, but an encounter. It is not just learning about God, it is being with God. It is not just understanding that Jesus is king, it is having him as your

king. Truth is being in that holy relationship—with God and with one another. But Pilate doesn't get it. He walks away. He gives in to the chief priests and he washes his hands of the whole thing. We don't really know what happens to Pilate after this. We know that he remains in charge in Judea for a few more years before he is called back to Rome, but then he fades from history, only remembered really in the words of the creed, "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

But in the Eastern Church there is a tradition that both Pilate and his wife later converted to Christianity and in the Egyptian Coptic church he is even recognized as one of the saints of the church. Western Christianity never bought into that idea though and through the years there were always legends about what happened to him, but no one really knows. What we do know is that at this moment in his life, at this encounter with truth, this encounter with God, at this trial of Jesus which is really a trial of Pilate, he turns his back and walks away.

One hopes that he gets another chance sometime in his life, otherwise one might believe one of those legends is true that

Again and again his body rises to the surface of a mountain lake and goes through the motion of washing its hands as he tries to cleanse himself not of something he'd done, for which God could forgive him, but of something he might have done but didn't, for which he could never forgive himself.^{vi}

If truth is not a definition but an encounter, then none of us have a monopoly on what is true, but we learn more and more about truth as we learn more and more about each other. And we learn more and more of truth as we follow the one who is the way and the truth. Unfortunately, this week we have been struck by divisions in our world because of people who believe they have a monopoly on truth and don't see that truth comes in the encounter with God, the holy relationships with him and with each other, even those who are different. There were attacks in Paris by those who believe that if you don't think their way then you are not of the truth and deserve to be killed. There are those in our country

who believe that we should only let refugees in who are Christian because then we can be safe because they know our truth. There were others who attacked a hotel in Mali and divided the Muslims out from the rest because they believed the Muslims had more right to live than the others. In so many cases, people were dividing, separating, building walls in the name of God, of truth. But if we believe in the search for truth and we believe it comes in the search for and encounter with God and with one another than we come closer to the truth and closer to God.

i This definition and the exercise with the apple can be found at <http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2015/01/29/What-is-Truth.aspx> It was an interesting read.

ii https://nei.nih.gov/health/color_blindness/facts_about

iii <http://www.radiolab.org/story/211178-rip-rainbow/>

iv *ibid*

v I later learned this quote is attributed to Rumi

vi Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979. p. 139.