

## **Belonging To The Truth**

John 18:33-38

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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?”

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### **I.**

It has been a very usual and interesting week around our house. Our friend and your fellow church member Molly Ames has been staying with us, as she spent time with her son and grandchildren who live in Potsdam, and any number of old friends in around the North Country. For over twenty years, Molly worked at Farm Credit here in Canton, raised two children, and was an important part of the life and mission of our congregation. She is also a real good egg.

At a point, Molly moved to and made her home in Ithaca, NY where she still owns a house. For the past five years, however, she has been a traveler or gypsy; living on the road first in a motorhome, then a 5th wheel camper and, most recently, out of a camper trailer currently parked in Utah while she makes an East Coast tour and overwinters in Ithaca.

### **II.**

Molly has always been a person who had wild hairs to pluck. Though it has been a great many years now, I can still remember one particular day when she walked into my office. This was way back when the pastor's study and church office shared the space which is now the Church School Art Room, with the copy machine and supplies being stashed in the closet that currently serves as our food pantry. Molly was looking for an adventure and to do some form of mission work on behalf of our congregation.

This led to Molly traveling to Malawi Africa as part of a small a contingent of people from the Presbytery of North New York; this was back when our presbytery actually undertook mission work, and afforded its member churches various opportunities to engage in the larger world on behalf of the Gospel. In so doing, local churches like ours were able to get beyond ourselves and our own small towns to gain a wider sense of belonging to the full scope of the Kingdom of God.

### **III.**

As it did with Ellen Grayson, Vicki McLain and Linda Potter who later followed her to Malawai, seeing and experiencing first-hand the loving and generous people who struggled to simply survive each day in the midst of *extreme* poverty quite simply rocked her world. All of this took place in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic in Africa which decimated a generation of men, who contracted the disease from prostitutes, and very often infected their wives as well. The result was the orphaning of thousands of children, who were often cared for by maternal grandmothers living in some of the worst conditions you could ever imagine.

Upon her return, and in an effort to address the great need she witnessed in Malawai, Molly began a program through our church called “Woman To Woman” which Ellen, Vicki and Linda eventually evolved into “Woman of Grace” and, in more recent years, led to our church assuming responsibility for the “Clint McCoy Feeding Center.”

### **IV.**

Though we certainly spent time this week chatted about our shared past, as well as the great many other experiences Molly has had these past five years traveling around the country, most of our recent conversations centered around the notion of “belonging” as she is currently in the process of considering pulling off the road to seek a more traditional “bricks and sticks” lifestyle.

Understandably, this has a certain appeal after five years of a hauling oneself and one’s belongings hither and yon; the question, though, is where? In what specific geographical location does one invest one’s time, energy and resources? Where does one choose to begin to build a community of support? Where will one derive the most gain in choosing one version of actuality to offset the cost of giving up the vast permutations of potentiality that life offers to us? Perhaps, though, a more poignant question is where do I feel most at home; that is, to whom and to what do I belong?

## V.

There was a time in my life, including while I have lived here in Canton, when I asked that question of myself with a relentlessness bordering on mania. Talking with Molly this past week, however, I realized it has been a great many years since I've posed such a question to myself; so much so I have almost forgotten what it feels like to have the ability to do so or, more to the point, the need to do so.

For the majority of us, understanding one's sense of belonging to a certain place, not to mention belonging to certain time or a certain group of people, is self-evident: we belong *where* we are by virtue of the fact this *is* where we are. While it is important to pose such a question whenever one reaches a crossroads in life, as is the case with Molly, it is also helpful to revisit the question every now and again if only to reaffirm for us our current sense of belonging; or, perhaps, to serve as a catalyst regarding that to which we could, or should, belong next in our lives.

## VI.

At a very fundamental level, each us belongs somewhere and somehow all the time and have very little choice in the matter. We belong to our parents, our children and our particular gene pool. We belong to the nation in which we live and the particular ethnic group (or groups) out of which we arise.

Other ways of belonging are purely a function of the choices we make: like who we marry, to have children or not, and deciding to join or participate in a certain political party, club, organization, affinity group and, yes, church or religious community; or not.

Of course, the degree to which we *feel* we belong to any of these, and the extent to which our actions reflect those feelings is really where the tale gets told. It did not matter how many times the American flag was marched past my 80 year old grandmother during the Memorial Day Parade, she stood up each and every time because she knew, at a deep and profound level, she belonged to this country and this country belonged to her.

## VII.

Of course, there are certain moments and occasions, such as the recent Election Day and family-get-togethers like Thanksgiving which compel us to examine our sense of belonging. There are also moments and occasions, such as our annual Stewardship Campaign, which provides us the opportunity to assess our sense of belonging and respond accordingly. On the whole, though, I think it is true to say that a great many of us really don't pay much attention to that to which we belong; a posture that lies somewhere between indifference and cavaliness.

Interestingly enough, these very same adjectives could be used to describe Jesus in his interaction with Pilate found in today's sermon text from John chapter 18. Which is an odd posture indeed, considering Pilate held the power of life or death; or so Pilate believed.

## VIII.

This morning's scripture clearly delineates two contrasting worlds to which one might belong. As the Governor of the Roman province of Judea under Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate belonged to a geo-political world of Empires, Kings and their armies. So, Pilate quite naturally queries the captive, "Are you the *King* of the Jews?" As a poor carpenter from Galilee who just happened to be the Son of God, Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not from this world."

Recognizing this must have been a most perplexing response, Jesus intimates the Spiritual world to which *he* belongs: "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." Still unclear, and to his great credit for seeking to understand the circumstance, Pilate again asks, "'So you *are* a king?" To which Jesus answers: "*You* say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world."

## IX.

Now, Jesus could have stopped right there because, at that point, he certainly realized whatever he said wasn't going to change the outcome. I believe, however, that Jesus truly did want Pilate to understand what was really going on, so he qualified his answer, saying: "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Here, then, is the line of demarcation which separates the world in which Pilate lived and existed, from that which Jesus inhabits: whether or not one belongs to the truth. It is the very same line that demarcates the world to which we, ourselves, may or may not belong depending on if we belong to the truth of the Gospel or not. Let us take note, however, it isn't a matter of *if* one's *hears* the truth; we *all hear* the truth. Rather, it is a matter of *if* we *listen* to that truth; and, more importantly, the voice which is speaking the truth.

## **X.**

Here is the really interesting thing, though. If you look at the Revised Common Lectionary, you will find today's passage listed as the Gospel reading which, quite obviously, is very appropriate for Christ the King Sunday. However, the passage is articulated as John 18:33-37. For some unknown reason, the final verse of that chapter, 38, is purposefully omitted. Why, I cannot say. Because, for me, the 38th verse is the *key* to the whole kit and kaboodle. "Pilate asks Jesus, 'What is truth?'"

That, right there, is the very same response most of the world uses to answer the question, "To whom and to what do I belong?" When one hears and listens to the Truth, capitol "T", there really isn't a reason to even ask such a question, as the answer is a forgone conclusion. However, when one hears but will not listen, life becomes a struggle and a scrap to decide amongst any number of competing truths, small "t", to which one might choose or be forced to belong.

## **XI.**

Molly listened to the Truth when she went to Malawi, as did Ellen, Vicki and Linda, and, then, they returned home and quite literally changed the world; or at least one small part of it. From what Barry tells me, the preliminary results of this year's Stewardship Campaign indicate a whole lot of us, all of us, really, are listening to the Truth in providing for the continued work and mission of our church; and, doing so in spite of COVID. When I look around our congregation and see the way you are caring for each other I know you are listening to the Truth; holding each other in prayer, sending cards and notes, being supportive and nurturing. When I begin to look ahead to the Farm Family Offering and the Christmas Giving Program we will soon undertake, I know we will be listening to the Truth to reach out to our neighbors in need.

## **XII.**

As we join together this week with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving, I have no doubt that we will be listening to the Truth in the way we recognize and share the bounty and blessings of our lives. And, while this world hastens onward with a cavalier indifference to the reality of *any* Truth whatsoever, we will abide in the refuge and comfort of knowing that *we* belong to the Truth, that we *belong* to God, that we belong to *one another*, and that we belong *here*, together, in this church we call *home*; a small part of Christ's Kingdom which is quite literally changing our *world*. Amen.