

Christ the King
November 22, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Buffalo, New York
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Bishops are a recent invention in the Lutheran Church. We never used to have them. Instead, we used to have Presidents. The whole Church, the larger Church, the national Church had a president and each synod, each diocese, for those of you who are not well versed in either the history or nomenclature of the Lutheran Church, had its own president. When I entered the ordained ministry in the Lutheran Church in America, which was what one of the three branches that formed the ELCA, or Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was called back then, the President of this diocese, this synod, was The Rev. Dr. Edward K Perry.

President Perry, better known as Ed, which is what we called him, was an interesting person. He suffered no fools, was egotistical and strong willed, he ruled the synod with an iron hand, tolerated no incompetence, no laziness, no excuses for screwing up. He told us, at the first pastors' meeting I ever attended, "Listen, I can understand if somewhere along the way in your ministry, you make a mistake. I can tolerate mistakes. What I can't tolerate is stupidity."

He also knew his parish; he knew each and every one of his pastors, and the history, personality, pros and cons of each parish and congregation within his Synod. He ran a balanced budget, and he knew what each congregation contributed and what each pastor's salary was.

When our church became the ELCA as a result of the consolidation of three smaller Lutheran Church bodies, as a way of communicating to the world what a Presiding or Synodical President did, we voted to start calling them bishops. At their core, they were still the same as they ever were, but many felt at the time that it was a cosmic shift in the church toward a more Episcopal and less congregational based model. The more conservative and somewhat reactionary Missouri Synod Lutheran Church still has Presidents.

Ed was the only President/Bishop the Upper New York State Synod ever had, serving from its creation out of the old ULCA and United Lutheran Church in the 60's. When it came time for Ed to retire, his long time faithful assistant, Dr. Lee Miller was elected Bishop to succeed him. I still remember what Bishop Perry told his successor on the day of his election. He said, "Congratulations, Lee, from this time onward, you'll never have a bad meal.....but you'll never hear the truth again."

What he meant by that was, that as Bishop, when you came to call on a Pastor or a Congregation, they'll try to do right by you by having something a little nicer than your traditional potluck dinner, but, when it comes to hearing from pastors and congregations what's really going on with them and their communities, the real story, the truth, will always be forever skewed or clouded, or perhaps, even hidden. When the Bishop calls and asks how're you doing, most times only the positive is accentuated with the somehow darker issues kept hidden. Rarely will the bishop hear,

“Boy I really screwed this up here, Ed. Nothing’s going right, our numbers are down, our budgets in the toilet, I can’t find the energy to even put in a full day’s work and it’s having a terrible effect on things.” No, most likely the bishop will hear, “Things are great.”

That’s when the bishop has to go and find the truth. And truth be told, oftentimes the truth finds him, or as in our case, her.

You’ll never have a bad meal and you’ll never hear the truth again.

The truth is elusive, isn’t it? We tell our children, “Just tell the truth...Honesty is the best policy...If you had only told me the truth from the start.” Husbands and wives would be better off if they always told the truth to each other, so much heartache and misunderstanding could be avoided. In dealing with our aging parents, in our schools and in our jobs, with our government and on the global stage, the truth would be refreshing, but more often than not the truth gets lost somewhere along the way.

Sometimes it gets lost in our best intentions, we say the truth is too painful, or we underestimate another’s ability to hear it or take it, we think sometimes it’s best to protect someone from the truth, or that a little white lie is the best course of action.

Sometimes, it gets hidden, because we believe the truth is not in our best interests. Better to stay the truth, and win the battle, because the end will justify the means, it doesn’t really matter if there were weapons of mass destruction or not...it doesn’t matter if the intelligence was skewed...it doesn’t matter if we broke the law to get what we needed to indict...it doesn’t matter if I lie as long as I get the job...it’ll stop the domino effect...it’ll create jobs...we need to do it to save the economy...

Other times, it’s not to be found at all. On these occasions, only the lesser of two less than truthful options is our only choice...we can’t let this large a company fail...if we don’t give them the bonuses they leave the company and we need them at this critical time...we never thought they’d do that....they’re too big to fail...

The problem then, the problem now, is, what is, where is, the truth? I could get behind a health care bill if I believed I was being told the truth. I think the world would be more supportive of green initiatives if they believed firmly in their hearts that the oil companies and the oil producing nations were telling us the truth. How many of you trust Wall Street, or Capitol Hill, or Albany? What is the truth regarding what’s really at stake in Iraq and Afghanistan?

The truth is elusive, as ever. Pilate, though hardly anybody’s teddy bear, was interested in only one thing in Palestine, keeping the peace and moving on to a better assignment. Jerusalem and its environs was hardly the plum of the Mediterranean. The primarily Jewish population living amidst a pagan state always made for strange bedfellows and managing their affairs was as difficult and tricky a business then as it has proven to be for the 20 centuries that have followed. It was the Passover, the biggest festival of the year, it was the Allentown Festival, the taste of Buffalo, First Night, Curtain Up, opening home game at the Ralph and the Fourth of July in South Buffalo and ribbon cutting on the new Peace Bridge and Bass Pro all rolled up into one event and the population of Jerusalem had quadrupled along with the problems regarding crowd control, sanitation, policing, and overtime. The crowds brought this insurgent before him and try

as he might, they would not let him adjudicate the problem with a wave of his hand and a dismissal of the charges.

They accused him of being a threat to Caesar, of starting his own movement to overthrow Rome and as you can imagine, Pilate wasn't taking the threat seriously. He knew the charges weren't the truth, he knew this man posed no threat to either his position or the Empire. But the people who were in charge, the city over which he had jurisdiction, were unstable and a riot during the Holy Days would not translate well in Rome. He had the power to release him, he had the power to wave his hand and have him executed, he didn't have to ask anyone's opinion and he didn't have to appeal to any higher authority because there was none.

Pilate did not know Jesus, did not know of his ministry, his miracles, his interpretation of Scripture, his powerful charisma, his intimacy with his heavenly Father, the power of his prayers, the challenges he put forth to power and the status quo. He never heard any of his parables, nor did he have any knowledge of his followers, the five thousand he fed on the hillsides, the miraculous catch of fish his direction garnered. But he knew how the world worked and how a selfish humanity operated. He knew, better than most about the pitfalls of ambition and how the desire for power and prestige often manipulated reality. I'm sure he bent the rules in his favor more than once and told the people what they wanted to hear and when he became Procurator of the Region, he never had another bad meal and subsequently, never heard the truth again.

So when Jesus told him that he came simply to bear witness to the truth, Pilate responded by asking, "what is truth?" "What is truth?" is the question we have most on our minds as well.

Today we end another Church Year. The celebration of Christ as King ends the liturgical year and we begin the New Year with the season of Advent next Sunday. Once again we will relive the drama that was the life, death, resurrection and Ascension of Christ and search the history of salvation for the clues that apply to our lives from his story, his teachings, his words, and his life.

Perhaps never before and most likely never since, did he ever stand closer to the truth than he did that day in the Praetorium when Jesus stood before him and told him that his Word was the embodiment of the truth. We would do well to acknowledge that fact ourselves.

Amen.