

Reformation Weekend 2024: “What Is Truth? Pilate & Us, Diane Keaton & Glenda”
Romans 3:20-29; John 8:31-36
October 26-27, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Winston Churchill once said:

The truth is incontrovertible.
Panic may resent it,
ignorance may deride it,
malice may distort it,
but there it is.

“The truth is incontrovertible [unarguable, undeniable, self-evident].” But **is** it? Especially in this confusing year of Artificial Intelligence uses multiplying like bunnies, we may be finding ourselves asking, like Pontius Pilate, “*What is truth?*” (John 18:38)

Just this last week I heard someone describing what happens when she and her co-workers’ conversations slip into the swamp of election politics. She feels compelled to say to them, “You’re believing a lie!” Their predictable response is, “No, **you’re** believing a lie!” People of faith on both sides of the aisle believe they have taken hold of the truth. But **both** sides can’t be **right** at the same time, saying such very different things. In humility we should probably add that neither side is completely wrong either.

“*What is truth?*” was Pilate’s cynical response to Jesus telling him that His **kingdom** was not of this world.

*37 Then Pilate said, “So, are you a king or not?” Jesus answered, “You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to **the truth**. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.”*

38 Pilate said, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38, The Message)

In today’s Gospel, the same one we hear every Reformation weekend, Jesus says:

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

The incontrovertible, undeniable, unchanging truth that Martin Luther called “the Gospel in miniature” is:

God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3:16-17)

This weekend’s epistle, from Paul’s letter to the Romans, includes the **good news** that Martin Luther came to embrace: **we are justified by grace, through faith, apart from the works of the law.** In other words, we can’t earn Heaven by doing good deeds and collecting brownie points. **Eternal life is a gift not a reward.** It is God’s gift to us through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a present we open in Holy Baptism and whose fruits and beauty we begin to enjoy in **this** life, not just in the **after**life. These are the holy truths Martin Luther used to counter the **fake news**, the **false truths**, spread within the Church of his time

Misinformation isn’t new in modern times. Biblically speaking, misinformation slithered into the Garden of Eden with the serpent who deceived Eve into believing it was okay to eat the apple. In Martin Luther’s day, the early 1500’s, misinformation included the teaching that the pope had **power** to reduce or expunge time which souls spent in Purgatory as punishment for their sins. That false news created a big revenue stream for Rome, because the faithful were told that these “indulgences” proclaiming the forgiveness of sins could be bought for a price. Luther’s famous reflection on that false truth was that if the Pope did indeed have the power to open the gates of heaven, he should do it for free, out of Christian charity!

The Reformation is about the correction of misinformation through the pure preaching of the Gospel, without human additions tacked on. The Holy Spirit inspired

Luther to preach about both Law **and** Gospel. If the Gospel is the good news of God's love, the Law is about the bad but real news of our sinfulness. No matter how hard we **try** to get it right, we fall short. Part of the time, we don't even **want** to "get it right," because it's more fun-in-the-moment **not** to! We have the 10 Commandments, the literal "Law," but we often fail to honor them. Jesus bundled the 10 into 2, saying that the 2 greatest commandments are to love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves. How we doin' with that, day in and day out? He raised the bar the highest when He gave a new commandment the night before He died: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" (John 13:34) True confessions: I don't come **near** to loving any of my neighbors as much as Jesus loves me! Most simply put, **we're all sinners in need of a Savior**. There is both bad but realistic news that we're sinners and unspeakably good news that we have a Savior!

Before He died, our Lord said He would send the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate, to lead us into all **truth** (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit is alive and well within us, among us, and offers real-time, earthly, this-side-of-Heaven "redemption" through some very human channels. Sometimes those human channels are celebrated and acknowledged publicly. On May 3 of this year the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our country's highest award granted to a civilian, was presented to a Jesuit priest, Fr. Gregory Boyle. Fr. Boyle founded what is now called Homeboy Industries, an outreach ministry to high-risk, formerly incarcerated gang members, both male and female. Each year over 10,000 ex-gang members receive job training and jobs, tattoo removal, counseling, legal assistance, educational and mental health services of all kinds. The truth is, these are former felons. The truth is also that these are human beings made in the image of God, who can begin to live fruitful lives when compassionately offered a second chance and a decent support system.

Fr. Boyle tells a story about the actress Diane Keaton visiting Homegirl Café in Los Angeles, part of Homeboy Industries. The counter workers and waitstaff are formerly incarcerated female gang members. One of them was serving Diane Keaton and ventured, “I think I recognize you.” The actress tried to brush it off, not wanting to draw attention to herself. But the waitress, named Glenda, insisted, “No, now I know. We were locked up together.” So wrong and yet so right! Fr. Boyle drew this lesson from that Homegirl Café encounter:

“It’s about kinship... God has created this otherness so that you might bump into each other and find that you’re homies, that you were locked up together.” Together, we’ve been locked up by sin, but set free by the Son.¹

All of us have been locked up by sin, because all of us have fallen short of the glory of God.

All of us, together, have been set free by the Son. “*What is truth?*” **That is** the God’s-

honest-truth. Amen

¹onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship, quoted in *Sundays and Seasons: Year B 2024* (Augsburg Fortress, 2023), p. 279.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

Homeboy Industries is located in Los Angeles, and