

BELONGING TO THE TRUTH

John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4-8

As we prepare to begin a new church year next week with the First Sunday of Advent, the coming of Jesus, we pause today and reflect upon who Jesus the Christ is in our lives. To challenge our thinking we turn, not to stables and shepherds, but to the final trial of Jesus. If we are to truly understand what Jesus means when he speaks about his reign in a kingdom that is not of this world, we need to know what it means to belong to this “kingdom” and how we are to follow Christ’s voice of truth.

The point at which we enter into John’s gospel today is when Jesus has been handed over to Pilate by his opponents. These opponents are certain Jewish religious leaders who see Jesus’ claim of being sent by God—of being the Messiah—as heretical. Their goal is to have Jesus put to death for breaking religious law, which is something they cannot do, so these Jewish leaders must turn to the Romans to fulfill that wish. Though these opponents of Jesus lack clarity in expressing to the Roman officials why they want Jesus to be sentenced to death, they are clear that they refuse to issue their own judgement. And so, we find Jesus and the Roman governor, Pilate, face to face.

The question of belonging is at the heart of this conversation between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate is trying to determine if Jesus claims to be the king of the Jewish nation, despite the fact that, and as he points out to Jesus, “your own nation and chief priests have handed you over to me.” Pilate could really care less about the affairs of the Jewish people. What he really wants to pinpoint is if Jesus is a threat to the Roman Empire. Does Jesus belong to the people who handed him over to Pilate? Is he claiming to be a Jewish king? Or is Jesus claiming to belong to a power and authority that could rise to political leadership in a way that challenges Roman rule?

Pilate needs more information, so he asks Jesus what he has done; what has transpired that is so awful that the authorities have handed him over to be killed? And this is where Jesus gets to the heart of belonging. Jesus explains that the nation, the “kingdom” to which he belongs, is not a political reality. In fact, we use the word “kingdom” because it is a word that is relatable to the people of the time; they know what a kingdom is because they live within the Roman Empire. Jesus’ kingdom doesn’t really fit into the definition of a Roman kingdom. And Jesus’ reign isn’t about power and authority, nor is it about military might or wealth or prestige. Rather, what Jesus

belongs to is a way of being that transcends earthly kingdom language and understanding, hence why Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36). Jesus and his followers belong to a kingdom that is not earthly bound; Jesus and his followers belong to the truth.

As human beings, we all have an innate need to belong. Belonging means we are not alone in this world but are a part of something bigger, a part of something collective and communal. You can't belong in isolation—belonging requires a community of others to respond to your presence within the group. You feel like you belong because you, on some level, are known to others, and others are known to you. But belonging isn't always easy or straightforward.

We see this a great deal in our country—we see the way that those who belong to Islam have been targeted; their mosques burned to the ground, or their people even killed, based only on their faith. We see the way that Black people have been discriminated against; the way that many Black children are taught how to respond to authorities in particular ways so that they won't be arrested, or even shot at. We see the way those who identify as LGBTQI have been tormented and abused in every way by those who choose to hold their fear of something they don't yet understand above an openness to building a relationship. We see the way that the Indigenous peoples have been treated as an exhausting problem to be solved rather than a people worthy of respect and dignity. While belonging to others who share your religion, your race, your orientation, or your culture can feel supportive and empowering, there can still be huge societal and systemic barriers that the community as a whole comes up against daily.

In our reading from Revelation, the visions of John of Patmos bring the reign of God and Christ to the forefront. It is a message of hope, and for very good reason: during the period of history in which this text was written, the Roman Empire had made being Christian painful and dangerous. The temptation to fall away from the faith and deny ever belonging was palpable. Writing from exile himself, John declares to a Christian community under imperial threat that with the Lord God, there is always more: more transformation to come than the earth has yet seen, and more dignity for God's people than earthly rulers recognize. John brings this hope to a people under persecution by establishing reasons to belong to Christ and unite under Christ as a community. John also establishes Christ as not just someone from the past, but as someone who is present now, in these current struggles, and who will continue to be present into the

future. He writes, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8).

When our belonging is under threat, it can be easy to want to pull away, to hide, or stay under the radar until things get easier. The question of belonging can also make it easy to focus on ourselves as individuals instead of the community-at-large. Our belonging becomes a testing ground. We might test our belonging to our families or friends, to our faith, to our workplaces, or even to our nation. We do this in a variety of ways. Sometimes it means stepping away for a few hours, or even a few days or weeks, to calm nerves and find clarity. But sometimes it means stepping away permanently. Sometimes it means delivering ultimatums. Some people test their belonging by simply drifting away quietly, wondering if anyone will notice. Others take time to engage in thoughtful conversation with family members or with the community's leadership and then, through measured prayer and discernment, decide whether to stay or to leave. Some see the actions, or inactions, of different levels of government as reason to threaten to move to a different province, or even a different country. All of these tests of belonging are focused on the individual's own decision making. But is this what Jesus meant when he said that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice? Is it really up to the individual to decide?

When Pilate questions Jesus asking, "So you are a king?" Jesus answers saying, "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." (John 18:37). So what is the truth? This is exactly what Pilate asks Jesus, though Jesus in some ways has already answered the question before Pilate can ask: it is Jesus, come to the world to establish God's "kingdom." And not a kingdom in the physical sense, but a kingdom that is not of this world; it is a community that upholds values that are totally different from the current system. It is a belief in the truth that Jesus came to earth to show and share a path of love and forgiveness, of death and resurrection; a path of dying to an old identity and way of being, a letting go of the need to belong to this earthly kingdom and being born into a new identity and way of being and belonging. Belonging is less about individual decisions and more about collective participation in a community that transcends the self. The reign of God is larger than any individual, even Jesus himself. Belonging cannot be decreed by law; it cannot be forced; it does not involve manipulation or power or self-centredness. Belonging to the truth is about opening our hearts in love.

We live in a world that is very individualistic, where each individual can proclaim their own truth and it must be accepted as valid. We've seen this especially during this

pandemic: people hoarding goods to ease their personal desires or anxieties instead of sharing with their neighbours; anti-vaxxers taking it upon themselves to protest their beliefs outside of hospitals, causing problems for those who need access to healthcare; people refusing to wear masks in indoor public spaces and increasing the risk of spread to those they come in contact with. In these cases, people are choosing individualism over the collective good. They place value on their own needs and desires, their own truth, over belonging to the community; they keep their hearts shut off from everyone around them. They, like Pilate, do not see or understand the truth, or how to belong to it.

The last words that Jesus says to Pilate within this particular conversation are, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." What does it mean to listen to Jesus' voice? How might we recognize that voice? Perhaps we could begin by considering whose voices we can recognize even without seeing them? They are likely the people who you have spent significant time with or have known the longest. For better or worse, their voices are ingrained in your consciousness, instantaneously recognizable. If belonging to the truth means recognizing Christ's voice, then should Christ's voice also be instantaneously recognizable? How do we know we are hearing it? We recognize certain people's voices because we spend time listening to them. And the same is with Christ; we come to know his voice when we listen with an open heart and mind. Sometimes that needs to happen on our own. But always it can happen with others. As we journey the path seen in Jesus, we need one another to help hear and listen and interpret and understand. We recognize Jesus' voice in the words and actions of those around us; in words of invitation and welcome, in the healing of broken people, in prayerful discernment, compassionate acts, speaking out for justice, showing forgiveness, and in hearts that are open and ready to be transformed in love.

Surely the kingdom is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present wherever we experience the reign of God through God's invitation, healing, and restoration—but our belonging is not up to each one of us alone. Our belonging is up to God. That is the new reality that Jesus proclaims. That is the new truth to which all of us—the community of those invited, loved, healed, forgiven, and restored—belong. Amen.