

Questionable Kingdom: *John 18:28-40*

Norwalk Christian Church, March 11, 2018, Narrative Lectionary John Year, Lent 4, Year B

The Fence

*Upon every point that arises
which may my opinion refute,
Upon every political issue
And on every local dispute,
In fact, upon every question
Where the interest is strong and intense,
My position is always the right one,
I invariably straddle the fence.*

*The position is not very easy,
And it doesn't look pretty at all,
If I lean to one side or the other,
I believe I am certain to fall;
And I think that I merit distinction,
And a credit mark, long and immense,
If on every question that cometh,
I can gracefully straddle the fence.*

No, this is not the elected officials manifesto. It is a poem, written in 1888, by J.B. Smiley, a humorist from Kalamazoo, Michigan. I couldn't find a lot of info on Smiley, other than what a perfect name for a humorist--Smiley. He was a popular, populist speaker, but that's about it. I'm not sure the inspiration for this poem, but he did write it right in the middle of the post-Civil War time period that was named by another humorist, one we know a little more about Mark Twain, who called this time period "The Gilded Age."

Post-war America saw an economic boom, and yet, at the same time there was a massive growth of poverty. During this period, the rich got richer, and the poor even poorer. There were a number of corruption scandals with public officials. And Twain said that the wealth in America, and the morality of public officials, was about as thick as the gold-leaf of something that is gilded. It looks shiny and solid, but it's really paper thin.

On a tour we took of the Iowa Capitol after we moved here, we were told the gold leaf on the capitol dome was so thin that if a human finger touched it, it would come off on your finger, and if removed and balled up, would only be about the size of a softball. That's thin.

So, I guess it made sense for a humorist named Smiley to write a poem about straddling the fence during the Gilded Age. It's a term we use for people who can't commit, who play both sides of an argument, makes promises to one group, then turns around and makes contradictory promises to someone else.

You would think fence straddling would be rather uncomfortable, but for many it's the chosen position.

To say you're for a needed change, but then do nothing to actually change it - that's fence straddling.

To pray in public, God, be with those less fortunate than us, but then never actually do anything to help those less fortunate than us--that's fence straddling.

To say, “All Are Welcome!”, but then never actually say you welcome someone who may be LGBTQI--that’s fence straddling.

And from our text this morning, to deliver Jesus to the Roman authorities so that they may kill him, but then to say, “Oh, I can’t go into a Roman court. It will make me unclean.” That’s fence-straddling.

This story is filled with fence-straddlers. The religious leaders deliver a man to be murdered, but they’re worried about being defiled and not able to eat the passover. They want him to be put to death, but Jewish law forbid capital punishment. So, they convince the Romans to put him to death, instead.

Pilate tries to have it both ways, too. He knows Jesus is innocent, yet he doesn’t want to incite the Jewish leaders.

Pilate talks with Jesus, tries to get him to say something that will prove Jesus’ guilt, while relieving Pilate’s guilt at the same time, but Jesus, like he does in John, speaks in evasive ways, and won’t play along.

“Are you a king,” he asks Jesus. “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.”

And Pilate replies, “What is truth?”

What is truth? Pilate has road the fence for so long, bent truth for so long to advance his agenda and appease people on both sides of the fence, he doesn’t even know what truth is anymore.

If this dialogue and this unusual question is unfamiliar to you, you’ve got good reason. We don’t talk about these stories surrounding the death of Jesus much in church anymore. If you’re like most of us, you go to church on Palm Sunday and then again on Easter, and skip these stories all together. We like to speed up this part of the story. Jump from “Hosanna, Hosanna,” to “Christ is Risen Indeed!”

If we do encounter these texts, it’s on Good Friday, where we read them all in bulk, reflect on them for a moment, and then move on.

We don’t dwell in these stories, yet every Gospel in the New Testament slows down the story when it gets to Jesus’ final days. Almost half of John’s Gospel is spent in the final week of Jesus’ life, and his trial before Pilate gets two whole chapters.

Maybe it's because we don't like talking about the death of Jesus. It's unpleasant, uncomfortable. But I wonder if it's also because we don't like talking about truth.

We live a lot of our lives on the fence. Commitment is hard. And if we were to admit something were true, then we'd have to get off the fence and make a decision. We'd have to change our lives.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus tells Pilate. The games you play in your kingdom have no place in my kingdom. There is no straddling the fence. My kingdom is about truth.

So, *what is truth?* The word "truth" appears in John's Gospel 20 times. In the other 3 Gospels combined, the word "truth" only shows up a *total* of 7 times. Truth is something John's Gospel is searching for.

In fact, the story begins with the Gospel declaring that the Word of God became flesh and was "full of grace and truth." In chapter 8, Jesus declares, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And in chapter 14, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

What is truth?, Pilate asks. Truth--is standing right in front of you. Truth is Jesus.

Pilate doesn't stick around long enough to get the answer to his question. Instead, he goes out to those who accuse Jesus, those who seem so concerned with truth and what is right, and yet they are hiding outside.

And Pilate pushes the decision off to them. Do you want me to set free Jesus? Do you want me to set free the truth? And the crowd shouts, "Give us Barabbas, the bandit."

Pilate fails his encounter with the truth. But we are, also, given a choice today.

You can't read this story on the fence. I guess we could've just skipped it altogether, avoid the uncomfortable part, avoid the choice, and then celebrate the resurrection. But here we are. Here Jesus stands. What will our choice be? Do we want to set Jesus free?

What would happen, if the truth was set free...in our church, in our city, in our world...in our lives? What would truth say? What would truth overturn? What would truth ask of us? Truth is risky. Truth exposes. Truth pushes us off the fence.

Do we want to set the truth free?

Or maybe the question should be, do we want to be set free by the truth.

Because straddling the fence can be awfully uncomfortable. But stepping off the fence into the truth, while risky, can be liberating. To be yourself. To make the choice to believe. To follow. To lead. To become what you know you need to become. To do what you need to do.

It can be risky, but it's liberating. It's free-ing.

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

And Jesus asks us all, do you want to be free?