

It was telling the truth, after all, that put Lt. Col Alexander Vindman out of a job for testifying at a presidential impeachment trial. It was telling the truth, after all, that murdered Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X. And Jesus.

Jesus knows this as he prays for his disciples, as he leaves them behind in order to get killed. Even so, as Jesus explicitly states his genuine truth-telling freedom will end his life – in accordance with the inherent evil backlash-toward-telling-the-truth that is revealed in our Scriptures – he prays that his disciples will do the same. That you and I – that we – will do the same!

Not because he wants us dead! But because he wants us to Live while we're still alive! Without fear! Without hesitation. Without remorse for having done the right thing, no matter the cost.

This is Life with a capital "L" Jesus wants us to live! Life that has meaning and purpose! Life with give and take among fallible humans in humble pursuit of infallible Spirit! Life with reciprocity, Life that is holy and worthy of the One Who Gives Us Life. Life that is so filled with the joy of genuine truth-telling there can be no doubt of our One-ness with God. Life that is truly "out of this world"!

And that really is what we want for you, too, our graduating seniors from high school and college. We do not just want you to be happy – although with Jesus we fervently pray for your joy – we want you to be GOOD!

And we know you will be. Because, like the disciples of Jesus for whom he prays, you Gigi Brown and Emily Sykes and Christopher Hicks and Ryan Paxton Snyder and Dylan Paul Snyder have already grasped the teachings

God has given us to share with you. You most emphatically have proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you are worthy of the commission (even in our increasingly deceitful moral universe) to maintain your genuine truth-telling commitment to the Radical Hospitality, Holistic Spirituality, and Engaged Compassion of Jesus.

In this fear-filled hour, yes.

And in every hour to come.

Let the church say, Amen!

We Hold These Truths

Rev: Gusti Linnea Newquist

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on John 17:6-19. Jesus Prays His Disciples Will Be Genuine Truth-Tellers.

"I have revealed your reputation to those whom, from this deceitful moral universe, you have placed into my care. They have been yours from the beginning, and you placed them in my care, and they have taken care to express only your divine wisdom. By now they have come to know that everything you have placed in my care is of you; because they have grasped the teachings that you gave to me to share with them. They know without a doubt that I came forth from you: and they have trusted that you commissioned me for this purpose. I am praying particularly for them. I am not praying some generic prayer for the whole moral universe. I am praying specifically for those you have placed in my care: they are, after all, ultimately yours. Everything, really is yours; and everything, really is mine; but I have been uniquely honored through these particular people you have placed in my care. As of this moment, I am leaving this deceitful moral universe and coming to you in the fullness of time. But they remain. Holy Abba God, protect them through the reputation you have placed in my care, so that they may be one, like we are. While I was with them, I was the one protecting them through the reputation you placed in my care. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, in accordance with the inherent evil backlash toward truth-telling that is revealed in our Scriptures. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in this moral universe so that these beloved may have my joy fulfilled

in themselves, even here. I have given them your teachings, and this deceitful moral universe has hated them because they just do not function according to “worldly” values. Neither do I. I am not asking you to take them out of this moral universe, but I do ask you to protect them from the evil that is in it. Neither they nor I really fit in the world-as-it-is. So I ask you to consecrate them in genuine, truth-telling, commitment to your teachings. In the same way you commissioned me into this moral universe, as full of joy and as full of evil as it is, so I commission them. For their sakes I maintain my commitment to your teachings, even through this final fear-filled hour, so that they also may maintain their genuine, truth-telling commitment to your teachings, in every hour to come.

You shall know the truth, Jesus says, nine chapters before this prayer at the end of his Last Supper with the disciples. And the truth shall set you free.

Which sounds like a great way to live our lives. The way we want to encourage our graduates this year to live YOUR lives. Right up until the chapter after our lesson for today, when, at the ensuing trial of Jesus, the Roman governor of Judea – Pontius Pilate himself – just before sentencing the truth-telling Jesus to death ponders, “What Is truth?”

What IS truth? Can you imagine? What a ridiculous question.

Except maybe not, in this twenty-first century post-postmodern culture. And even if we could figure out what truth is, can it really set us “free”? All it seems to do for Jesus is get him killed!

That is the burning question before us, as we celebrate our high school and college graduates and commission you, in The Way of Jesus, into a moral universe that, let’s face it, is having particular trouble with the truth these days.

There are Pontius Pilates everywhere, it seems, deliberately deceiving those they are supposed to be serving: “The Big Lie” of a supposedly stolen presidential election. “The Big Hoax” of a foreign virus invading our pure white innocent nation. The even bigger hoax of just this week describing the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol as “a normal tourist visit.”

That simple Proverb from our First Pew Puppet Jesus is proven right all around us: “If you tell the truth, you can save a life, but if you tell a lie, you hurt everyone.”

590,000 dead in this country alone. We are all hurting!

This is not to invalidate the variety of perspectives that people of good conscience may hold on “the truth.” In fact, a central tenet of Presbyterian teaching is that none of us have the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help me God. We are all fallible. We can only discern truth in community: each of us speaking the truth as we understand it; each of us listening with open minds and hearts to the truth spoken as another understands it. Slogging our way through the challenges and opportunities of shared truth – and shared fallibility – toward decision-making that always acknowledges an approximation of divine truth. And an awareness of the need to be always reformed in that approximation.

In other words, we shall know the approximate truth, Presbyterians might re-phrase the teaching of Jesus to say. And hold it with great humility

until the Holy Spirit reveals a reformation of that approximation. And then another one. And then another. Only one day in the fullness of time far into the unknown future might we finally experience – as one fully re-formed creation – the full freedom of God’s divine truth.

But that is still assuming we are seeking divine truth in good faith. The truth is, beloved graduates we who love you dearly must confess we are commissioning you into a moral universe that is not only fallible but is in fact deceitful. Not only are infallible people of good conscience seeking to discern with humility, but a pandemic of intentional dishonesty threatens the well-being of us all. Pontius Pilates are everywhere!

And we are praying fervently, as Jesus prayed for his disciples, that the God of genuine truth-telling freedom will protect you from the fallout of that pandemic of intentional dishonesty, as we have tried to protect you but can do so no longer.

Beloved graduates, I am afraid we are telling you, with hearts that are breaking as we say it, that genuine truth-telling in this deceitful moral universe escalating all around us, as we join with Jesus in asking you to embrace, may very well set your spirit free; it may very well set your conscience free; it will absolutely garner you great esteem among this community that commissions you into the world; but it may very well cost you: your job; your prized position of leadership; your seat in Congress; your inheritance; your home. And for some in The Way of Jesus (dear God, let it not be any of you), genuine Spirit-filled truth-telling may cost your life.

It was telling the truth, after all, that put Rosa Parks in jail for confronting that other Big Lie: White supremacy.