

WITNESS TO THE TRUTH
John 18: 33-37

Machiavelli was an Italian politician and writer who was born in 1461. For about 14 years he held a high office in the Republic of Florence. Then in 1512 the Medici family with the assistance of Spanish troops conquered Florence. For a brief time Machiavelli was imprisoned and tortured. After his release, Machiavelli retired to his farm and began to write. In 1513 he finished his most famous work, *The Prince*. It is styled as a handbook for any prince who wishes to maintain political power.

Now up to this point in history Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* held sway in most political theory. Both works insist that political legitimacy is built upon the ruler's personal morality and integrity. Machiavelli, fresh off his experience of losing his political position, then imprisonment and torture, argued otherwise.

His view is that the prince should prefer to be feared rather than loved, that he must use cruelty, terror, and deception to maintain power. And in fact, power is its own legitimacy, whoever has the gold and the most troops will rule. Politics is not about moral integrity, but about having what Machiavelli calls a "flexible disposition."

That "flexible disposition" means the prince does whatever it takes to stay in power. So the prince must be a good actor and dissembler, able to lie through his teeth if it is necessary. Politics is most akin to battlefield tactics in warfare, where one does what is called for in the moment.

And so Machiavelli recommends that the prince practice the politics of deception. In a memorable quote he observes this: "A skillful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived." Politics is all about deception and ruthlessness, not truthfulness and integrity. Years later the French writer Rousseau noted that *The Prince* reveals the truth about how most princes actually behave behind closed doors.

We get a glimpse of that in Jesus' brief trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor in Jerusalem. The Gospel of John pictures Pilate's early morning interrogation of Jesus with a question that appears in all four Gospels, "Are you the King of the Jews?" In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' only answer to Pilate are these cryptic words, "You have said so." But that is not the case in John's Gospel. Jesus engages in a debate with Pilate, the one who has the power of life and death in his hands. Jesus soon discovers

that Pilate is simply repeating the charge made against him by the religious authorities. Pilate wants to know only one thing, “What have you done?”

It is here that Jesus instructs Pilate in the nature of his kingship. He said, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it, my kingdom is not from here.” Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is spiritual, not one to take up arms for. Even if Peter wielded the sword during the arrest at Gethsemane, this is not what Jesus asks of his followers.

Because Pilate hears only the word “kingdom”, he asks, “So you are a king?” Again Jesus has to clarify who he is and what he stands for: “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.” Jesus is a witness to the truth, that is his kingly role, his majestic purpose in life. And Jesus is sure that those who seek the truth will listen to his voice. This is an appeal to Pilate to hear the truth to which Jesus bears witness.

But Pilate has learned his politics, if you will, from the school of Machiavelli. And so he asks rather sardonically, “What is truth?” Perhaps we can assume from this response that he has decided after all his years in politics to trust no one. The politics of deception is the world he inhabits. Pilate no doubt assumed that people seldom if ever tell the truth, especially those on trial for their lives. How could he believe Jesus? The leading lights of the nation had accused him of sedition and treason. What could this commoner say that wasn’t a self-interested lie?

The politics of deception—that is the truth Pilate adhered to. Trust no one and play your cards close to your chest. No wonder he asked, “What is truth?” How could he have recognized it anyway? Truth remains a stranger to those who never bother to seek it.

Standing before Pilate is a witness to the truth. The prologue to John testifies that “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Jesus himself said that he is “the way and the truth and the life.” Furthermore, Jesus promised, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Jesus tells the truth about God. Jesus tells the truth about God’s love for us, God’s mercy upon us, and God’s promises to us. Jesus tells us the truth about ourselves, our need to turn from the lies all about us to that truth that shines in the darkness. Jesus bears witness to the truth. A truth Pilate can hardly recognize, standing there before him bound as a prisoner.

It is hard, so very hard, to uncover the truth. Especially when the truth presents itself as an accused criminal. The truth is often rejected and

despised. Jesus presents a challenge to all our notions of how truth is packaged. Truth comes to us as one unknown, with no place to lay his head, without stature or prestige. And yet there he is, the witness to the truth, the one who suffered for his truth. The One who offers us this amazing promise: “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” An offer that invites us beyond lies and deception, those comfortable illusions we entertain about ourselves and the world.

How hard it is to discern the truth with so much cloud cover. So much dis-information, so much propaganda, so much political posturing. As the health care bill comes to the Senate, I need to warn you to buckle your seat belt, because it promises to be a bumpy ride. A ride filled with truths, half-truths, and bunk. Overstatements, understatements, and smoke screens. I so wish that there were some way a “Truth Meter” could automatically record what percentage of the truth any politician is uttering. You know, let the “Truth Meter” signal, “20%” or “75%” or “Zero %”. Oh to know the truth, the simple truth about anything at all! Oh to be spared a political world where Machiavelli rules!

No one said the truth is easy to discern. And no one ever said that the truth is easy to follow. It takes courage and perseverance and diligence. Most of all, it takes humility and prayer. For us, truth is forever embodied in the one who had “no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” The Truth was a “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” The Truth was willing to die for what he believed.

On this day we offer again our hearts and our lives to the Truth incarnate, the One who stands before every human authority to bear witness to the Truth about God and the Truth about ourselves. May God grant us the humility and the receptivity to receive this truth that will make us free indeed. Amen.