

March 11, 2018 Lent 4 Manor Road United Church
Rev. Debra Schneider John 18: 28 – 40 What is Truth?

On June 5th, 1989 photographs and video were taken of a thin young man in a white shirt and black pants. He is holding a white plastic bag in each hand. He is standing in the middle of a road. It is the day after a violent and deadly government crackdown against student protesters rallying against increasingly oppressive and brutal Chinese government policies and actions. In the video, the young man stands resolute, facing the first in a column of tanks moving towards Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The tanks come to a halt one by one, and there is a face-off lasting for several minutes during which the tank tries to manoeuvre around the young man, who calmly moves block it's procession at every attempt. Finally someone emerges from the crowd and pulls him out of the way. Tiananmen Square means "The Gate of Heavenly Peace."

On July 16, 2016 there was a Black Lives Matter rally in front of police headquarters in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Just over 100 people had gathered, and were obstructing traffic in protest of police brutality against the black community... including three recent police shootings of black men where it was feared that police would not be held accountable. Iesha L. Evans, a young black woman wearing a long flowing summer dress and sandals steps out from the crowd and into the street. She stands facing a line of Louisiana state troopers dressed in riot gear. Jonathan Bachman, on assignment for Reuters, looks over his shoulder, sees what is happening, and snaps a picture that captures the world's attention. Evans is poised, vulnerable and calm as the troopers move in to arrest her. She later writes on her Facebook page: "This is the work of God. I am a vessel! Glory to the most high! I'm glad I'm alive and safe." (The Guardian, July 11 2016)

We all have memories of moments in time that have exposed in an instant the awful power and brutality of oppressive governments and corrupt systems. Often, it is through the dignity and vulnerability of those who like 'Tank Man,' or Iesha Evans, dare by the simplest of gestures give witness to the moral bankruptcy of such powers. Images of such moments hold a powerful place in our memories and our collective consciousness.

We witness just such a moment in this morning's gospel. It is early in the morning on the day in which Jesus is crucified. Pilate, governing under the great 'Pax Romana,' has the power and authority to crucify anyone suspected of conspiring to come up against the powers of Rome. Roman rule is absolute, resolute, and often violently imposed upon her citizens. Jerusalem is a Roman-occupied State. Pilate, Rome's governor over Jerusalem, has left his lavish palatial estate on the Mediterranean and travelled inland, accompanied by regiments of Roman soldiers, for the purpose of making a visible show of Roman power and authority during the Passover Celebrations in Jerusalem. Passover, as Pilate well knows, celebrates the divine liberation of the Jewish people from the oppression her Egyptian overlords, and as such by its very nature carries within its story, its rituals and its ethos, the seeds of insurrection.

The Jewish officials shrewdly take advantage of the tensions inherent in this moment to bring Jesus before Pilate and make charges of insurrection against him. These officials have some time ago decided that Jesus must be executed. As the High Priest, Caiaphas' chilling words still ring in our ears, they come back to haunt us: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." Not having the authority to carry out such an execution themselves, they are determined to seize this moment to manipulate Pilate into carrying out Jesus' execution on their behalf.

And so it is that this morning, we find Jesus—a simple Galilean messenger of divine love and compassion, calmly and with dignity standing before the brutal powers of Rome, accused of plotting insurrection—a crime punishable by death.

The thing that strikes me about situations such as these is that those who capture the imagination of the world around them in taking a stand against corrupt and oppressive governments, laws, workplaces, religious institutions, and even families, find themselves simply caught up in a moment when something rises up from deep within their souls and simply refuses to sit down and be quiet.

I doubt that young man woke up that June morning in Beijing and thought, “I’m going to go out and face down a tank today!” I’m quite sure Aisha Evans never in a million years imagined herself standing as she did on that day when those Louisiana State Troopers advanced upon her and took her into custody.

It is as if there are moments in time when we as individuals simply must embody and witness to the truth of our human dignity, even in the face of realities that would attempt to deny, deface, or destroy it. To fail in this would be to betray that which is most precious and profoundly true within us—our God-given dignity.

In this morning’s gospel reading, Jesus has one of those moments. He stands before Pilate, and all the powers at his disposal and says simply, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

The Kingdom for which Jesus stands is one whose foundation is love—love of God, love of friend, love of stranger, and love of this beautiful planet which is our only home. The kingdom for which Jesus stands will not participate in words or acts of violence because such things violate the very nature of love.

The kingdom for which Jesus stands will not participate in the exploitation and oppression of the weak and the vulnerable, for such things undermine love’s flourishing. The kingdom for which Jesus stands is not marked by despair for with love at its foundations there is always room for hope, even if its shape is at times unrecognizable and somewhere on the far horizon.

These are grand thoughts, I know, but realistically how do they take shape in our lives? In my experience, it is often in the small gestures of love, compassion or solidarity that are extended to others freely, from the heart, and without cost.

Last night as I was pondering this, I asked myself to think of a time when I experienced or witnessed a simple and unexpected expression of love and solidarity that honoured my or another’s place in the world with a simple dignity. Surprisingly, what came to mind was a Sunday morning when I was attending Metropolitan Community Church—the LGBTQ Cathedral church of Toronto. At that church, when they go forward for communion, people often go as couples, families, or small groups of friends and take communion together. I always go forward alone, sometimes feeling ‘alone’ as I do.

On one particular Sunday as I was walking towards the front, a transgendered friend came up beside me, smiled, put his arm around my waist for the briefest of moments and walked with me to the front where we receive communion together. It was a small thing... the simplest of gestures...and it brought me into community, and in some way healed a small loneliness in my heart.

Some questions you might ponder this week: Can you remember a moment when you were touched by someone’s love and solidarity in the face of circumstances that threatened to deny you your God-given dignity? Do you recall a time when you felt impelled to extend such solidarity to another? Have you ever personally witnessed the beauty of such an act of solidarity and support? Have you ever imagined that in each of these moments, you are witnessing the in-breaking of The Kingdom of God?