“What is Truth?” - Stephanie Sorge, 3/27/22

Last week, Jesus and his disciples were confronted with a crowd of soldiers and police. This week, the angry mob that has gathered is an insider crowd - referred to by John as “the Jews.”

I’ve shelved this subject throughout our time in John, but as we enter into the Passion narrative, it’s time to address what scholars call “the Jewish problem.” Of course it’s complicated, and we can get bogged down in semantics pretty quickly. Today I’m going to share what I’ve found to be the best and most succinct explanation for John’s characterization of “the Jews” in this gospel.

John was the latest of the four gospels written, sometime in the last decade of the first century of the Common Era, about 60 years after Jesus’s death. It was addressed to the growing, early Christian community. Jesus was Jewish. His disciples were Jewish. Most of the early believers were Jewish, and wouldn’t have ever considered themselves otherwise. Only as John was being composed was there a burgeoning community that understood itself to be distinct from the contemporary Jewish community.

As the Roman Empire expanded, it tended to be tolerant of local religious practices and deities, as long as they weren’t exclusivist, and as long as their practices weren’t seen either as abhorrent or seditious. You can see how both Judaism and Christianity could have posed some problems there. The Jewish community initially had some degree of support and autonomy in the last decades before the Common Era, but that didn’t last.

It was during the First Jewish-Roman War, an uprising which took place from 66-73, that the Second Temple was destroyed. At this Judaism and Christianity were still regarded as one group by the Roman Empire, but in the mid-90s, Christianity was recognized as a separate and distinct religion - legally and politically. This was John’s context.

We know that John’s language is anachronistic. In John, the synagogues are seats of religious authority, but that was only the case after Jesus’s life, when the Temple was destroyed. He refers to the Pharisees as the primary religious leaders in opposition to Jesus, when, during Jesus’s time, his trial would have been conducted by the Sanhedrin - not mentioned by John. John is clearly speaking to the realities at the end of the first century more than the historical context of Jesus and the events retold in this gospel.

As Christians continued to separate from their Jewish siblings, they faced more external persecution from the Roman rulers, in addition to growing antagonism with Judaism. That’s why Jesus’s protection and claim over his followers was so important. Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This was to assure the early Christians that they *also* were in God’s fold. Passages meant to assure early Christians of God’s inclusive love have since become exclusionary weapons to condemn anyone who isn’t a Christian straight to hell.

Jesus’s predictions in this gospel that the world would be against his followers reflected the reality of the late first century believers. “The Jews” were John’s shorthand for anyone in the world that is against Jesus’s followers. They were also a much safer scapegoat than the Roman authorities. We easily see from our reading the extent to which John goes to transfer blame from Pilate to “the Jews.”

According to John, Pilate sees nothing to condemn in Jesus. When would the authority closest to the Empire see someone claiming kingship and say, “Yeah, no big deal.”? Even if Pilate was personally drawn to Jesus, even if he wanted to keep him alive, Pilate’s neck would be on the line with Rome. There is no way he would have risked his political career and life to release this seditionist. Instead, John puts the thirst for blood on the Jewish crowd. They are the ones that bring Jesus to Pilate because they don’t have the authority to kill him, and that’s all they want: Jesus, dead.

Throughout this gospel, John does quite a number on “the Jews” - and that’s without even looking at chapter 8, where Jesus tells “the Jews” that they are children of the devil. Nothing I’ve said excuses that. Having some possible explanations, or more context, still doesn’t make John’s treatment of “the Jews” right or ok. Over the centuries, these passages contributed mightily to deep anti-Semitism in Christianity.

Lest we think that we are enlightened enough to separate the anti-Semitism from the texts, think about this. Have you ever been to a worship service at a synagogue, or mosque, or another faith’s house of worship? I have, and I’ve always felt like an honored guest. Imagine inviting a Jewish friend to experience a worship service, and how they might feel as this passage is read. Even in the most inclusive, progressive, and interfaith committed congregations, these texts can still do harm.

Recently, the Jewish New Testament Scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, has argued that these passages - John’s passion narrative - should be removed from Lectionaries.[[1]](#footnote-1) They have done such historic harm, and have deeply imbedded anti-Semitism into the church, and she thinks we can’t use them responsibly today. Yet, here we are, with these texts - and many more ahead of them. From now until Easter, we will continue to hear about the horrible things “the Jews” did to Jesus. Whether we exclude or include the readings from John 18-19, we need to tell the truth, and confess, the harm that these texts have done, especially in the hands of increasingly privileged and powerful Christians.

Which brings us to today’s question. What is truth? It’s hard to imagine a more important time for us to be asking that question than in our current context. We’ve seen the advent of “truthiness” - something is true if it \*feels\* true. If it confirms our biases. We’ve heard about “facts” versus “alternate facts.” With the explosion of “news” sources with free and easy online distribution, algorithms designed to show us more of what we already like and trust, and specific campaigns designed to spread misinformation and sow seeds of distrust, what is truth?

Truth is a big focus in this gospel. The word or variations appear 25 times in John, compared with 4 times in the other 3 gospels, combined. Jesus is truth itself. Jesus testifies to the truth of God - which is divine and lavish love, abundant grace and life. Truth is real and honest. It brings everything into clear sight. Truth exposes the lies that we tell ourselves and the world. Earlier John, Jesus tells “the Jews who believed him” that the truth would set them free.

Being confronted with truth doesn’t really feel like freedom. Instead, it calls us to account. To repent and change. Truth telling is confession. I must confess… I cannot lie… To tell the truth… Those are the easy ones. It’s one thing to confess eating the last cookie, which I certainly have never, ever, done. It’s another to confront the truth of our corporate sins - white supremacy, misogyny and misogynoir, abhorrent wealth inequality, environmental destruction, and hate, discrimination, and violence based on gender identity, religion, ethnicity, and so many other lines of division. Confronting the truth of the ways in which we benefit from and participate in systems that are contrary to the peace, justice, and righteousness of God’s realm does not feel good. It removes the freedoms we might claim in ignorance. It forces us to recognize where we stand and what we will do in response to the truth of God in Jesus Christ.

In John’s Gospel, truth is not a what, but a who. Jesus has already said that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Truth is God’s presence revealed in Jesus Christ. And so is grace. So is abundant life, and love. Jesus is the truth that we confront in humility, and the grace that makes space for us there. Jesus is the truth that reveals the idols we worship, and the abundant life that those idols can never give. Jesus is the truth that illuminates our need for transformation, and the unconditional love that is given freely, just as we are, today.

Confronted with the truth, we can walk away, like Pilate. Challenged by the truth, we can double down on the lies that make us feel secure, even choosing a bandit over a shepherding savior, as the crowd does. Or we can face it. With humility. Willing to grow through self-searching honesty. Ready to be confronted with the chasm between God’s will for all of Creation, and the actual realities to which we cling. But this is what it means to follow Jesus. This is truth. And grace. And love. And life. Amen.

1. https://deputynews.org/change-the-lectionary/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)