

Sermon: March 22, 2026

John 19:1-16a

In John 18 and 19 we are confronted with the themes of truth and authority. Both Jesus' divine truth and authority and the twisting of truth and authority by those who would see him condemned. I will not pretend that this is a happy sermon. These chapters are hard to read. It is gruesome to bear witness to Jesus' cruel treatment and to the seeming triumph of evil over good despite our knowledge of the resurrection to come. Where were the voices of dissent? Why didn't Pilate try harder to use his station to prove Jesus' innocence? Were there people present who believed in Jesus but were too afraid to speak up? Were the voices of the mob too overwhelming in their distortion of the truth?

It is particularly maddening to sit through this account when we think that we now know the reality of the situation. But let us approach these passages with humility. We are no strangers today to falsehood and corrupt leadership. And we can be duped in subtle ways – by being bogged down in complexities that conceal the truth, by being intimidated by shows of power, and by tricking ourselves into thinking our voices are insignificant.

This morning, I want to reflect on how we still fall prey to these types of distortion just as the mob did in Jesus' story. I'll start with an example from my undergraduate experience.

In my intro to theology class at Conrad Grebel, I remember having to read the philosopher Georg Hegel. I felt frustrated about how difficult it was to comprehend. And after reading one particular passage over and over again late into the night, I finally felt like I reached some understanding and I was proud of myself!

Years later, I have reflected on this a-ha moment. Particularly when I started teaching philosophical concepts in university classes. Why did Hegel have to be so intellectually inaccessible? What's the point of philosophy if it's so hard to understand? If Hegel's ideas are important, why make them difficult for people to follow?

There is a term in philosophy called "obscurantism" which means to deliberately present ideas in a way that confuses people or steers them away from the truth in its simplest form. Some other philosophers, like Plato, purposely wrote in such a way that only the most "intelligent" readers could appreciate their work. One of the

reasons for this method were the underlying belief that only an elite group of thinkers are worthy to lead society.

Plato espoused something called the “Noble Lie” – a lie told to the common people to keep them in their place to preserve the “greater good.”

Critics of this view argued that this approach keeps society as a whole from becoming enlightened. Ideas that are clothed in obscurantism or the noble lie, become the exclusive domain of a chosen few leaving others in ignorance. Does this preserve the greater good?

It seems to me that philosophies like this guard knowledge for the purposes of power. They belittle in an attempt to make people question their own judgment and the guidance of their conscience. And they are a clever way of avoiding accountability for wrong doing. It is like a magician using misdirection to avert our eyes from figuring out how they do their tricks.

We see this happening in court cases when a survivor of assault tells their story and is then met with a kind of obscurantism that is aimed at denying or confusing the truth so as not to claim responsibility for harm.

When I studied at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, now Canadian Mennonite University, one of the key texts of my theological learning was Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder’s book *The Politics of Jesus*. Like many others, I felt betrayal and disorientation when it came out years later that Yoder had sexually assaulted a number of women that were under his spiritual care and educational guidance.

Ironically, one of the main themes of Yoder’s work is how the church should discipline those who have done wrong. He based this on Matthew 18. Verses 15-17 talk about how we should confront someone face-to-face in private if they sin against us as a first point of action. Of course, the many women that he harmed “failed” to do this, choosing safety by reporting him to church officials instead of facing him alone in private. What followed was the slow and painful process of uncovering the myriad abuses of an influential leader. These women should be applauded for their great courage and commitment to the truth while they experienced barriers to justice and public exposure.

While Yoder was teaching about Matthew 18 and the words of Jesus, he was twisting the meaning of this passage to his own sinful advantage. In the case of a mutual conflict between two equals, Matthew's advice is meaningful. In the case of an abuse of power, the parties are not equal and the ones being wronged should be protected by the church rather than being subjected to intellectual gymnastics that warp and obscure the truth.

In 1994, Mark A. Noll published a book called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* in which he outlines the historical streak of anti-intellectualism in Evangelical Christianity, particularly American fundamentalist forms of evangelicalism. He writes about the waves of religious revival during what has been called the "Great Awakenings" in the 18th-20th centuries. These revivals, that swept across America, were aimed, in part, at eliciting emotional responses from those in attendance rather than academic appeals to rigorous biblical scholarship, scientific discovery and doctrinal theology. This emotionalism was meant to be a more democratic way of including everyone in the Christian life, not just the educated.

I can see how there would be a theological reaction against the exclusivity and privilege of intellectual faith. Perhaps the Reformation was motivated by similar ideas in its attempts to make the Bible accessible to everyone, not just to the priests. People like Luther fought to translate the Bible into commonly used languages so that it could be read by all.

But emotionalism can manipulate just as philosophical obscurantism can. I observed this in some members of my extended family. Some of my relatives are suspicious of higher education and their faith is more personal and heart-centred. When I was 15, my grandpa died and after the funeral, one such relative waited until I was alone before asking me if I'd invited Jesus into my heart. I had never heard these types of words before and I was confused. She might have had good intentions, but I also felt like she was catching me at a vulnerable moment out of the ear-shot of my parents who would have been uncomfortable with this evangelical language. We can use both appeals to emotion and dense philosophical reasoning to misuse power.

So how does this all relate to what is unfolding in the life of Jesus and his followers leading up to his death?

In the last few chapters of John that we have been examining over Lent, Jesus becomes more and more clear in his preaching of the truth. He does not use

emotional manipulation to scare people into accepting this truth or confound people with ideas they can't understand.

Jesus does not hide who he is or his mission to peaceably bring about God's kingdom on earth. He faces those who are threatened by him without fighting back or escaping judgment, knowing the dire consequences of telling the truth.

In last week's reading from John, chapter 18, Jesus has an interesting conversation with Pilate, who has the power to call for his execution. At this point in the story, the stakes couldn't be higher for Jesus. Pilate and Jesus talk about what it means that Jesus has been called the "king of the Jews" and about why Jesus' own people might want to see him dead.

Pilate seems to know the score, the players, and the political implications, but he engages Jesus in a series of questions that dance around the truth. For example, Jesus explains to Pilate: "the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Jesus is very plain with Pilate. He speaks directly and simply, but Pilate does not respond with equal plainness and asks Jesus the rhetorical question: "what is truth?"

When someone confronts us with an inconvenient truth, do we ask the philosophical question "what is truth anyway" because we don't want to deal with it? Do we obscure the obvious because of negative consequences that could put us in uncomfortable positions? Do we nitpick over insignificant details to avoid the truth and what results from speaking the truth?

In this week's scripture reading from John 19, we read about Jesus being condemned to death. Pilate now believes Jesus to be innocent and tries a number of times to convince the crowd that there is no valid case against him. Pilate does not want to crucify Jesus, but he becomes afraid of the crowd and eventually wipes his hands of him.

What follows is a brutal pageantry of torture and ridicule. The crowd mocks Jesus sarcastically by calling him the "king of the Jews", dressing him in a royal purple robe and placing a crown of thorns on his head. Here we see the dissonance between true kingship given by God and the denial of that kingship by the crowd. The crowd proclaims that their only king is Caesar, therefore Jesus must be a fake and a blasphemer.

Through it all, Jesus does not turn from the truth. He does not take the easy way out or retaliate through violence. Jesus is king by virtue of the reign of God. He does not seek kingship in the corrupt system of the world.

In his book *Dissident Discipleship*, David Augsburger contrasts the kingdom of God with what he calls the “domination system.” In the domination system, Jesus and Jesus’ disciples are “strangers” (John 17:14, 16). They are not citizens of a world that mocks what is good and denies righteousness and we, too, are called to be strangers to this world.

Augsburger writes:

“[Like Jesus and the disciples], we live within a domination system of organized fear, institutionalized greed, rationalized violence, and socially accepted hatred, but we are strangers to its creed of greed, fear, coercion and we-they thinking. There is no true spirituality at the end of the pursuit of greed, none that is motivated by fear, none that is nourished by violence, none that carries out the practices of hate. These are acts of obedience to the domination system and not to the reign of God. Every violent action is an act of faith in the domination system.”¹

I would like to conclude this sermon with a different ending, but we cannot escape the reality that the domination system has placed the burden of the cross upon our shoulders. It makes a mockery of us for preaching the way of non-violence and for championing those who cannot resist the system on their own. Jesus’ death is an act of disobedience to this system, despite the irony of his submission. He knows that he must bear this earthly burden in order to be resurrected in the kingdom of God. And we must find ways to do the same. So let us not fall prey to false prophets or give in to daunting odds. Let us be people of faith, grappling with inconvenient truths and keeping our minds focused on the promise of resurrection. Let us remember that we find our truth in Jesus’ teachings and our strength in the faith of our community.

I’ll end with the Psalmist’s encouraging vision of blessing in the midst of trying times (144:9-14):

9 I will sing a new song to you, O God;
upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you,
10 the one who gives victory to kings,
who rescues his servant David.

¹ David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship*, Ada: Baker Publishing Group, 2006, 138.

11 Rescue me from the cruel sword,
and deliver me from the hand of aliens,
whose mouths speak lies,
and whose right hands are false.

12 May our sons in their youth
be like plants full grown,
our daughters like corner pillars,
cut for the building of a palace.

13 May our barns be filled
with produce of every kind;
may our sheep increase by thousands,
by tens of thousands in our fields,

14 and may our cattle be heavy with young.
May there be no breach in the walls, no exile,
and no cry of distress in our streets.

Amen