

Prayer for Illumination

O Holy God, the source of all goodness and grace, we thank you for your Word. As we hear it read and proclaimed this morning, allow our hearts to receive this wisdom you graciously offer us. May we spiritually ingest that which will nourish and sustain our faith and lead us to abundant life and humble service in the name of Jesus, in whose holy name we pray. Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (NRSV)

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ In contrast, God is why you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The Word of God for the people of God...

John 18:33-38 (NRSV)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “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 is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “you say that I am a king. 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.” ³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.

The Word of God for the people of God...

The Axis of Love

The ancient Greek philosophers, and later the early church fathers, spoke of three prime virtues: truth, goodness, and beauty. Early Christian theologians located the source of these prime virtues as proceeding from God—truth, goodness, and beauty are virtues because God is true, good, and beautiful. Thus, this trinity of virtues becomes a guide to our lives of Christian faith. We seek to believe what is true, be what is good, and behold what is beautiful. But, as we’ve considered over the course of this worship series, of these three virtues, beauty has been the most marginalized. We tend to place emphasis on persuading people into faith or promoting our good works to encourage participation, rather than inviting folks into something that, at its very core, is the most beautiful story ever written or shared. It is a beauty that is based on the cruciform love of God in Jesus Christ.

That the Roman cross, an instrument of physical torture and psychological terror, could ever become an object of beauty representing faith, hope, and love is an

amazing miracle of transformation. Every cross adorning a church is in itself a sermon—a sermon proclaiming that if Christ can transform the Roman instrument of execution into a thing of beauty, then there is hope that in Christ all things can be made beautiful. This is precisely the claim that our faith makes concerning what Jesus accomplished in his death. We declare that through the execution of a particular Jew by a provincial governor in an eastern outpost of the Roman Empire during the first half of the first century, God was doing nothing less than saving the world. How God saves the world through Jesus' death is a deep, multi-faceted mystery, and one that doesn't give way to simplistic or formulaic explanation. But the church has always affirmed that the cross stands at the heart of our faith, and we boldly confess that the cross is the locus of God's saving intervention as God acts within human history. One way of viewing the cross through the lens of beauty is to see how at Calvary the world was given a new axis—an axis of love.

An axis is a line around which an object or objects rotate—thus we can speak of the earth rotating on its axis. The subjects of math and physics have never come easy to me. I remember my first forays into placing points on graphing paper and how tedious I found it to be. You have the horizontal axis, or the X axis, and you have a vertical axis, the Y axis. Given that we live in a three-dimensional world, there is also a third axis, the Z axis—as if the first two weren't confusing enough. It's the stuff my nightmares are made of. What I mean by an axis of love is identifying the centering principle of faith, one that is fundamental to organizing a social structure. In his crucifixion, Jesus gave the world a new ultimate truth, a new axis around which to rotate—an axis of love.

So, let's dive into the text a bit. After Jesus was betrayed by Judas with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was brought before the Jewish high priest Caiaphas and the ruling counsel of the Sanhedrin for a religious trial. There he was convicted of blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Following his religious trial, he was taken before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for a civil trial. Pilate had little interest in taking on the case and simply wanted to dismiss the matter. In response, Caiaphas pursued a different tactic. He pointed out that Jesus' messianic claim was not merely a religious matter but

also a political one. To claim to be the Jewish Messiah was a claim to be the Jewish king. If Jesus' claim to be the anointed Jewish king was religious blasphemy as it was to Caiaphas, it was deemed a political insurrection to the larger Roman empire. The Jews already had a king—King Herod Antipas, the puppet ruler appointed by the Roman Emperor to serve as the king of the Jews. If this Galilean was making a claim for the Jewish throne, then it was a political matter. Thus, Pilate had no other choice than to take on the case and interrogate Jesus.

Jesus was brought into Pilate's headquarters where Pilate asked him a decisive question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus gave tacit acknowledgement and said, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from the world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." We should not think that Jesus was not saying his kingdom wasn't *for* the world, as if it were merely a spiritual kingdom or a kingdom somewhere off in space. Rather Jesus was saying his kingdom was not *from* this world—it was not based upon the assumed order of things. To paraphrase, Jesus was saying something like, "Yes, I am a king. But my reign will not come about the same way that all the other kingdoms of the world have come about. The empires of pharaohs and Caesars came through violent conquest and military might. My reign does not come in this manner; it does not come in the way of this world."

At this point, Pilate is a bit confused. How can a person really be a king if his kingdom doesn't come from this world? So, he restates the original question, "So you are a king?" To which Jesus responds, "you say that I am a king. 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." Pilate then gave his now famous and cynical reply— "What is truth?" He then proceeds to have Jesus taken away and flogged by his soldiers. After being flogged, Jesus returns to Pilate's headquarters, this time bloody, crowned with thorns, and draped in purple as a mockery of his regal claims. As Pilate resumed his questioning, Jesus remained silent. In frustration, Pilate turns to threat: "Do you not know that I have power... to crucify you?" In this moment, Pilate answers his own question: "what is truth."

The truth is— “I have the power to crucify you!” For Pilate and for the world, power is truth and the power to kill is both ultimate power and ultimate truth. In the end it is the truth of power enforced by violence that is the ultimate truth of the principalities and powers of this world. The truth of power enforced by violence is the axis around which the world revolves. The power of violence is the bottom line, the organizing principle of our fallen world.

Pilate seems to hope that this idealistic Galilean would come to his senses and face reality. Pilate is in effect saying: “Look, you seem harmless enough, and I don’t really want to have to execute you, but you have to face reality and accept the truth. The truth is that the world is run by people of power, people like Caesar. Just admit that you’re not a king and you can go. But if you continue to challenge our power by claiming to be a king, you will have to face the truth, and the truth is, I have the power over your life.

Here we find a collision of power. For Pilate the truth is that the world is run by those who have the means to enforce their will upon others, ultimately by the possibility of death. And yet, as Jesus calmly shared with his disciples gathered around the Passover table earlier the previous evening, “I do not give as the world gives.”

On October 8, 2010, Dritan Proj, a thirty-four-year-old pastor in Shkoder, Albania was murdered as he was on his way to pick up his two young children from school. He was murdered because his family was involved in a blood feud that began five years earlier. Blood feuds have been a part of Albanian society, especially the northern part of the country, for centuries. According to the unspoken rules, if someone is killed, then that family has the right—even the obligation—to avenge the death by killing another male from the offending family. Blood feuds would typically wear on until all the males of one family are dead. Apparently in the northern part of Albania there were hundreds of men living in hiding for fear of deadly reprisal in the unending cycle of violence. Families and villages are paralyzed by fear in this poor region as so many folks wouldn’t dare to venture outside their homes.

Dritan lived this way for some time, as a captive in his own home, but eventually decided he would not succumb to the evil of blood feuds and would choose to live openly. He and his brother decided that if one of them was killed, the other would not take the blood in an exercise of revenge. They would allow the cycle of violence to die with them in a deliberate imitation of Christ. Dritan had remarked to others that he felt his life might be used to help bring an end to this terrible plague. In the year leading up to his death, Dritan and his church helped lead a large program to aid flood victims in their region. As a result, Dritan was well-known in the community and was a highly respected man of faith and peace. When he was killed, there was extensive news coverage of his death throughout Albania. His death helped expose the false “honor” behind the demonic philosophy of blood feuds. Two weeks after his death, a large rally was held in the capital city of Tirana with thousands of people turning out to name and shame the senseless destructiveness of never-ending blood feuds. Many carried signs that read, “To forgive is manly”—a concept completely contrary to cultural assumptions and one that eventually undermined the insidious foundation of the blood feuds. Many churches embraced this moment as an opportunity to promote forgiveness and help move people past their feelings of vengeance and payback.

There is a deep irony in the way Pontius Pilate viewed the cross. Pilate could have easily said, “The cross is truth.” By which he would have meant, power is ultimate reality and ultimate power is the power to kill. Violence is reality. Violence is truth. The cross, therefore, is truth. To which Jesus could have replied, “Yes, the cross is truth. But not in its power to kill, but in the power and choice to love. Ultimate truth is not power enforced through violence, but love expressed through forgiveness. From the day Cain killed Abel, the world organized around the principle of power by violence—the original axis of evil, if it were. But Christ came to give an unforgiving, bloody world a new story, a new way of understanding power, a new organizing principle, a new axis. Christ came that a new axis would replace the old one, only this time organized around the principles of love and forgiveness.

Like the legendary phoenix arising out of the ashes of the old life, the resurrection of Christ brings forth a new life, and a transformed world based on the axis of love. This Jesus, who could have unleashed armies of avenging angels on the world yet, in his death throes, cried out for God to forgive his tormentors. The cross becomes beautiful when we see that it is here that God unmask the ways of darkness and violence and takes away the finality of death itself. It is in the axis of love expressed in the forgiveness that Jesus reigns as Prince of Peace. It is in the axis of love expressed in forgiveness that we find the beauty that will save the world.

Benediction: A FRANCISCAN BLESSING

May God bless you with a restless discomfort

about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships,

so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger

at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,

so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom,

and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed

with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation,

or the loss of all that they cherish,

so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them

and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness

to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,

so that you are able, with God's grace,

to do what others claim cannot be done.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**