

Cameron Barr
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God's Currency
John 18: 33-38a

It might surprise you to learn that there's a lot of paperwork involved in ministry. In our office and various closets around the building you can find filing cabinets and thick binders stuffed full of papers. Old bulletins, consultant reports, financial statements. Our business manager, Duane Gilbert, dedicates one day each year just to shredding loose papers that flutter around the office. Every year, to deal with health insurance for our staff or to update financial information, we have to print reams of forms to send, by mail, to our church-related pension and insurance agencies. These agencies have digitized almost none of their work. Few transactions can be completed without pen and ink, and a handwritten signature. So imagine my surprise when the pension agency that hardly has a functional website recently announced churches can now invest their endowments in cryptocurrency. Really? Let me find my checkbook. What is the mailing address for Bitcoin?

Big tech has monopolized our existence. The pandemic pushed our work and family relationships onto Zoom. Most of our shopping is done on Amazon. You can summon a driver with Uber or with Lyft. The gig economy even has apps to access healthcare professionals. Our existence feels less real year by year - more distant from one another, less present to our needs and circumstances. Mark Zuckerberg says the next step is some mystical experience of virtual reality. Here we are driven to this digital frontier where even those least prepared to enter the metaverse feel anxious to leap across the threshold. What choice do they have? We want to imagine that the church is a space set apart from the economy, a community unsoiled by the sins of the world. But after two years of conducting worship over Facebook, maybe we should have guessed we'd soon be investing God's money in crypto.

II

I'm talking about the irony we've all experienced in the digital age, and increasingly in the past two years. Our feet are planted in one reality, but our heads are in another reality. This division of ourselves is resulting in so many pathologies. A culture of comparison and self-judgment creating anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders for young people. Willful misinformation and dishonesty in our public rhetoric. Historic deficiencies of trust in central institutions and practices. Every new technology brings the promise of new goods and possibilities - every new technology is also a new weapon in the arsenal of evil. We stand at this threshold unable to distinguish what is trustworthy, unable to discern what is factual and real. We're so invested in what is unreal and what is online that we do not attend to those things that are very real and immediate.

When Pilate asks at the trial of Jesus, "What is truth?" he is asking a very contemporary question. Jesus pleads with him, by contrast - can't you see, I am the truth? "For this I was born,

and for this I came into the world,” Jesus says, “to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” But Pilate has so little faith in what is real and what is true that he’s not listening to the one who speaks to him now. His head is full of other voices. His attention is distracted by the crowd. When Jesus stands before Pilate, he struggles to explain how he is in the world but not of the world, sent by God as an agent of a heavenly kingdom. How is he to describe the paradox of God’s love? It is divine and also human. It’s heavenly love, but there’s nothing more earthly and real. God cannot be seen or perceived - so here is Jesus in flesh and blood. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus says elsewhere. Jesus is the very real and tactile presence of God. God real and alive enough to weep and to bleed. The crowd jeered at him. Pilate sentenced him. Thomas touched him. Mary and Martha broke bread with him.

III

Many of you know that my grandmother passed away two weeks ago. You were so kind to send notes and cards to share your condolences. It meant so much to know the church was praying for our family during that time. I was the oldest of four grandchildren. To each of us she left a large jar of coins. Mine was a five gallon glass carboy filled with loose pocket change from every denomination. It was only about a third full, but she obviously stopped adding to it when it became too heavy to move from one place to another. The other grandchildren had jugs, too. Their collections were all quarters, state quarters, which my grandmother began collecting indiscriminately when the mint commissioned designs state by state. She would never spend any state quarters that passed through her purse. And she’d often demand that you empty your pockets so she could buy any state quarters you might be carrying. She didn’t care about correct change. She’d happily give you a one dollar bill or a five dollar bill for a single state quarter. Of course she knew as well as you and I that there’s nothing valuable about those state quarters. They’re not considered rare or worthy of collecting. They’ll never be worth more than 25¢. But to me all those coins were a material sign of her love. Each coin has a physical presence, weight, and texture. You know it’s real because you can hold it in your hand. You know it’s value because it’s written on its face. Those common coins, some of them dirty, some of them worn from use and wear, were sacramental. They were a visible sign of an invisible truth - that my grandmother loved me.

IV

People of faith are too often misunderstood as out of touch with reality. Our faith is seen as some kind of otherworldly fantasy. Make no mistake: we do share hope in what we cannot see. Our faith is in God’s promises that are not yet our reality. But we are invested in those promises not because we wish to escape our existence but because we are so in tune with our reality. We have faith because we live with so many doubts. We keep the hope because we have experienced the suffering. We insist on love because we have felt the pain. Christian faith is not merely a pie in the sky mystical experience. No it is grounded in the realness of human life. It’s not a digital mystery - it’s a hard currency.

We are here to testify to what we have seen and experienced. This is the love of God. We know it is real because we can hold the bread and break it in our hands. We can taste it in the

fruit of the vine. We can see it in the likeness of Christ etched in the face of our neighbors. We can feel it in the cleansing of the fresh water.

So - invest your savings in cryptocurrency. Organize your life with online forms. Go to church and worship God somewhere in the metaverse. But don't confuse your digital reality for human existence. What is truth? Pilate asks?

There is nothing more true than this. God's love revealed among us. So real you can taste and see, you can touch and feel. This is the love of Christ.

Like the rich young man in the Gospel, you can take it to the bank.

Or with the mite of a lonely widow, you can put it in the plate.

Amen.