

B Christ the King 11.24.24

John 18:33-37

Focus Statement: We're living in the Kingdom of God

A group of us came together to help Wayne and Vicki move on Tuesday. This was a totally last-minute thing. Wayne found out Monday night that he needed to be out. I called Eileen and Pastor Ed, and when I showed up at Wayne's apartment at 9:30am with a U-Haul, there were six people already at work. And I mean, at work. If you've helped someone move recently, you remember it's hard, dirty work. Wayne and Vicki had spent Monday night getting as many things together and in boxes as they could, and it was only a two-bedroom apartment, but still. But by a little after two, we had all of their stuff out. As we stood in their now empty apartment, I turned to Diane and reflected, I think today is what the Kingdom of God looks like.

I was thinking about the Kingdom of God this week because today is Christ the King Sunday. In the world of religious holidays, Christ the King Sunday is a baby, less than one-hundred years old. It was instituted by Pope Pius the eleventh in 1925. Why would the pope have thought the world needed a new religious holiday? Think about the world in 1925. Just after the end of World War One, World War Two was on the horizon, but no one knew it yet. In the west it was the Roaring Twenties. Flush with post-war cash and riding a stock market bubble, America was increasingly secularizing. People don't tend to prioritize God when times are good. In Russia, the communist revolution had just taken control. Fascism was on the rise in Italy and Spain. And in Germany, Nazism was gaining ground. In short, the world was thick with strongmen leaders professing that they alone could save us. Pope Pius instituted Christ the King Sunday in an effort to turn the church away from these rising

nationalistic forces and back to God. Just shy of one-hundred years later, in the middle of another period of rising nationalistic forces, Christ the King Sunday again forces us to contemplate the question of to whom will we be answerable at the end of days? To what kingdom, or republic, or democracy, even, do we owe our ultimate allegiance? If the answer to that question is Christ, then we need to consider what kind of king Christ has revealed himself to be. To quote theologian Frank Senn, “the one on the throne is the Lamb who was slain. Self-giving love is the agenda throughout his dominion.”

Our Gospel reading for today shows Jesus and Pilate wrestling with just those very questions. This scene comes in the middle of the passion narrative. Jesus has been betrayed by his disciples and handed over to the religious leadership, who in turn handed him over to Pilate. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea and most accounts describe him as a mean-spirited and cruel leader who scorned his Jewish subjects, especially the religious leadership. But this wasn't an “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” sort of a situation. Just because the religious leaders didn't like Jesus, didn't mean Pilate did. Pilate saw Jesus as an opportunity to humiliate and ridicule the religious leaders, forcing them into the hands of the emperor and causing Pilate's star to rise.

The conversation begins with Pilate asking Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” To which Jesus answered, “do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” This is a great response because it is a subtle dig at Pilate's power. Do you ask this on your own, Jesus asked Pilate, are you allowed have your own thoughts? Or are you just a puppet of what others say to you? Pilate caught the dig, but Pilate hadn't risen to power by falling for

simple power plays, so he countered, “I am not a Jew, am I.” The English translation ends this sentence with a question mark, but be clear, this is not a question. Pilate is making a statement, I am not a Jew. I am not a member of the religious leadership who handed you over to me. I am a Roman, I am from Rome. I am Rome, as far as you are concerned, with all the power of the emperor behind me. But here’s something fascinating about the grammar of that sentence. We’ve heard it before. Back in John chapter nine, the healing of the man born blind. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus they asserted, “Surely we are not blind, are we.” Again, not a question. But by asking the not-question, by asserting their distinction, the Pharisees were confirming that, unlike the man born blind, they could not “see,” and we’ll use see in the Johannine sense of knowing Jesus, they could not see Jesus. The same thing is happening here. By asserting himself as not part of the religious leadership, Pilate was placing himself in the same camp as those who had also rejected Jesus in preference to their own power.

“I am not a Jew, am I,” Pilate asserted, “what have you done?” To which Jesus responded, “my kingdom is not from this world.” The word translated as kingdom is *basileia*, which has more of the sense of kingship or reign, rather than the mappable boundaries of a kingdom. When Jesus spoke of this otherworldly kingdom, he wasn’t talking about a physical location, he was talking about a relational one. Jesus was explaining the source of his authority, his connection to the Father.

Physical or relational, sources of authority was something Pilate knew well. So he countered, “so you are a king?” To which Jesus replied, you say that I am a king. You say

that I am a king. The distinction in grammar between Jesus' clarification of what he was not and Pilate's caught me. Pilate's protest, "I am not a Jew," made it clear that while not part of the religious leadership, Pilate was squarely in the group of those whose desire for power and control caused them to oppose the expanse of caring and concern for one another that the reign of God required. Jesus countered, "You say that I am a king," because he understood Pilate's worldview couldn't understand an authority that lifted up rather than lorded over, that prioritized care and concern for the least and the lowly instead of the consolidation of power and control, that valued love of others over loyalty to a fixed way of being. Pilate's understanding of authority was the power it gave him to impose laws and lord over others. But Jesus' authority wasn't meant for power and glory, it was meant for one thing only, "to testify to the truth."

Our reading for this morning stops there. But I want to go on one more verse, because I have long found verse thirty-eight one of the most interesting and thought-provoking lines of scripture. I have long thought that someday when I'm smarter and more well-read, I want to dedicate a lot of time to contemplating this very verse and asking the question of what it means in a moment such as ours. Because in verse thirty-eight, Pilate asked Jesus, in a voice that I just have to imagine was dripping with scorn, "What is truth?"

"What is truth?" I've found that question fascinating for years, and as we enter fully into what is coming to seem like a post-truth society, where facts themselves seem debatable, I've found this question even more intriguing. If we no longer share acceptance of the same basic set of facts, what possibly could be the basis for truth? But I started wondering this

week, what if Pilate couldn't understand truth for the same reason he couldn't understand the kingship of Jesus. Because the truth of Christ's reign, based in the authority of the relationship with the Father, imposed only a single law, a law both unbelievable simple and impossibly harder to live out than anything Pilate could have imagined, the law of love.

Dear people of God, the kingdom of God is not a place, some faraway somewhere beyond the cosmos we go to when we die, where Christ rules as king over a land bordered by pearly gates, where we have wings, play harps, and float around on clouds. There may well be such a place we all get to go to one day, though I confess I hope there are only harps in parts. But when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, he was referring to a reality much more current than that. The truth of the kingdom of God is that it is found wherever there are relationships of caring. It is in people giving up a Tuesday to help a friend move, for no reason other than you know he'd help you. It is afternoons at the food pantry, sometimes getting yelled at by that one grumpy patron, because even grumpy people deserve both food and the dignity of getting to be unpleasant sometimes. It is singing together, praying together, praising together, coming together around the table and being fed with the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ Jesus, and knowing what cannot be proven, that this meal, this gathering, these relationships change us for the better. Dear people of God, we, today, right now, are living in the kingdom of God. May we be good citizens of that kingdom, and share the love, the grace, and the peace we find here with all that we meet, so that the kingdom of God may grow. Thanks be to God. Amen.