

Everyone Who Belongs

November 21, 2021

John 18: 33-37

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."

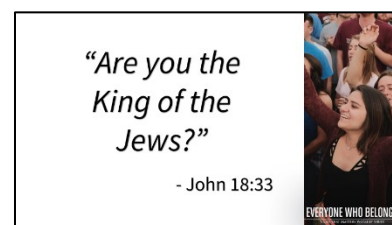


Today is "Reign of Christ" Sunday! It marks the end of the liturgical year and on this day, as we wrap up a year's worth of worship, we state that we belong to

Jesus Christ. As we close the Christian year, we reiterate our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We accomplish this mission primarily by following Jesus. Learning to be like Jesus and to live out our faith is not always easy. As we grow in our discipleship we are made more and more into the loving and serving community, modeling ourselves after the one who loved and served the world. On this day it is natural to consecrate our gifts and our time given to God and to the community of faith. As we begin this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Turn with me to John 18 as we begin this morning. This text contains a very profound interaction between Jesus and Pilate. Both are rulers with great power. As we consider this conversation between a prisoner in chains and his jailer holding all of the keys, one can't help but wonder who is really in control. Jesus' evening is just beginning. He has not been flogged or beaten or abused. That ordeal is yet to come. At this point the Jews have accused Jesus of blasphemy, a crime punishable by death in Judaism. The problem is that the religious leaders do not have the power to kill under Roman law. Just before this conversation that we delve into today, Pilate has been out in the courtyard, going back and forth with the religious leaders. His position of power was a tenuous one. Pilate and the religious leaders maintained a delicate balance of power. Although neither one liked the other very much, their places of power were intertwined. In the grand scheme of things, Pilate was the one ultimately in control. He was the Emperor's man.

Pilate understands that the religious leaders want to be rid of Jesus. That much is clear. They have insinuated that Jesus is a threat to Rome, to the Emperor. Jesus has said that his kingdom is drawing near after all. But Jesus is not on the Roman FBI's "Top Ten" list. He is not even remotely considered a threat to the power of Rome or even to Pilate himself. And yet there is this big hubbub going on around this person named Jesus. Pilate goes back inside and summons Jesus. Probably after looking over this sorry excuse for a holy man for a moment or two, Pilate asks Jesus, *"Are you the king of the Jews?"* Pilate probably even made some grand, mocking gesture towards Jesus as he asked him this question: *"Are you the king of the Jews?"*



As he asks this question, Pilate thinks that he is in control of the situation. He is the one appointed by Rome to rule this small area of the world. He is the one who holds the life or death of Jesus in his hands. He is the one who can give in to the religious authorities or can roll out the troops to deny their request, to remind them of who really is in charge. As Jesus speaks, he takes control of the conversation and of what will soon happen to him. This is the way of Jesus, isn't it? All those times that the religious leaders thought they had Jesus trapped... Just a few words from Jesus always left them floundering, pride wounded, reputation taken down a step or two. All those times when people would flatter Jesus, thinking it would get them somewhere... Just a few words from Jesus and they usually left with a challenge to think or live differently, to be better. All those people who wanted to be left alone, to remain out of the spotlight... Just a few words from Jesus, maybe an invitation to come down out of that tree, and their lives were changed forever. All those people who gave up everything to follow him, thinking they knew what they were getting into... Left over and over again with mouths wide opened as Jesus calmed the sea, healed the lame, raised the dead. Each of these people caught a glimpse of a reality that they did not even know existed before they met Jesus. And so it was with Pilate. *"Are you the king of the Jews?"*

Jesus responds, *"Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"* The tables are suddenly turned. Pilate blurts out, *"I am not a Jew, am I?"* How do you expect me to know anything about you, Jesus? Suddenly the key holder is the one without power. There was nothing he could do to unlock this mess of a moment that he found himself in.

Pilate declares that he has no skin in the game, no horse in the race. I am not a Jew. How do you expect me to understand this conflict that revolves around you, Jesus? It was Pilate's way of trying to throw his hands up and to back away from the situation. Pilate finally asks Jesus, *"What have you done?"* Pilate cannot answer the question. From his conversation with the religious leaders, he cannot answer this question. Pilate looks to the only one who can answer the question, to the one in control. In response Jesus says, *"My kingdom is not from this world."* Well that just clears things up! Pilate can get back to his Thursday night festivities now. No, this does not solve Pilate's problem.



This answer does not help Pilate in dealing with the angry group of religious leaders out in the courtyard, those bent on eliminating this Jesus.

As Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, we too can struggle with what this means. At a cognitive level we understand that Jesus left heaven and came to dwell among us on this earth. Intellectually we know that Jesus died and rose again, returning to sit at the father's right hand. We get the practical part of who and what Jesus was and is. But can we apply that knowledge to our walk of faith, to how we live in his kingdom while on this earth? Is faith about getting through this life with as little damage or suffering as possible? Is it reminding us that this life, this flesh and bone and breath thing, is not what really defines us in the big scope of God? Are these words reminding us that we are simply passing through, waiting for something better someplace else? Yes, this statement by Jesus is about all of these things. Jesus' kingdom calls us ever towards the "not yet" of our faith. Yet Jesus' kingdom is also here and now.

What if Jesus was telling Pilate, his followers, us today, that this kingdom was about a new way to live and to be in this world, in this time and place?

Jesus does tell Pilate that if his kingdom were like the ones that Pilate knows all about, then his followers would *"be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews."* If Jesus were all about an earthly kingdom, there would be revolt and violence and uprising. His followers would be willing to fight and even to die for what they believed in, for what they thought they deserved, for their king. It is almost the opposite of this vision. Jesus is not about violence or forcing his way. The uprising that Jesus is leading is nothing like anything Pilate has ever seen. The kingdom that Jesus proclaims is about love and compassion, about service and relationship. Jesus' kingdom is unlike anything else in this world.

This all goes right over Pilate's head. He is treading water. He knows that he has totally lost control of the situation, of the conversation with this Jesus. Like a man who knows he is drowning, Pilate grasps at the only thing he understands. He blurts out, *"So you are a king?"* Jesus, give me something I can work with here. Help me out a bit. The religious leaders are still out there in the courtyard. Head spinning, Pilate is now probably even further from a real solution to this problem. The religious leaders are clearly upset. Pilate just wants to defuse a civil crisis. Pilate does not care one bit about Jesus or his message. He just wants to avoid civil unrest. Pilate does not want this situation to draw attention to himself or his ability – or inability – to lead. Yet Pilate senses some of Jesus' power, some of his might. It is with a sense of desperation that he asks if Jesus is a king.

Jesus speaks of a kingdom that Pilate does not even begin to understand. A king, huh? Maybe there is something threatening in what Jesus is saying. Maybe a kingdom of love and service does threaten what Pilate knows. Maybe Jesus' vision of how the world should be, could be, maybe was created to be is a threat to the norms of Pilate's world. Many today see the kingdom of Jesus Christ as a threat to their world, to their way of being and doing in the world, to their vision of success and power. Many remain opposed to this kingdom of Jesus Christ.

The ways that Pilate thinks of a king are so different than the ways that Jesus thinks of a king. Pilate thinks in terms of power, conflict, rule, and authority. Then and in our world today, "kings" rule by fear, by threat, by military might. This is not the way of Christ. Again, Christ rules by example, by love, by compassion, by grace, by mercy, by forgiveness.

Jesus shifts the conversation in verse 37. Pilate wants to talk about kings – earthly kings at least. In this verse Jesus declares, *"I came into the world to testify to the truth."* This, of course, is more than Pilate can comprehend. But for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ as the King, as the Lord of our life, Jesus speaks the truth about living, the truth about faith, the truth about meaning and purpose in this life. He speaks truth about grace and forgiveness and reconciliation. A life that matters clings to truth. A life that matters belongs to these truths.

"I came into the world to testify to the truth."

- John 18:37



To claim Christ as the King puts an end to the untruths in our lives. To claim Christ as Lord declares our intent to live a life that matters, to live a life that holds lightly to our possessions and even to our own life. The human way of living is one of limits, one of scarcity. Living fully present to the world tells us that we will never have enough, that we can never do enough, that we can never love enough, and that can never be enough. When living this way, we are constantly hemmed in, always guarding and holding onto what we have. God's way is the way of abundance, of generosity. God's way is full of endless possibilities and unlimited resources. God's way says there is more than enough, that everyone belongs, that all are invited into the kingdom of God.



To claim Christ as Lord declares that we will take the long view, living fully in this moment, yes, yet not letting the moments define us. To claim Christ as Lord clings to the hope we profess in the one who was and is and is to come. To claim Christ as Lord is to declare that we belong to the truth. Truth transcends our limited earthly perspectives and opens our hearts to hearing the voice of Christ as our guide and gives us hope for living a life that matters. Truth invites us to see and to live into a larger, bigger perspective. It is the larger, kingdom perspective that gives Jesus the courage to live into eternal realities instead of being dismayed by the bleak reality of his present, earthly situation as he stands before Pilate.

This larger, bigger perspective is also the lesson for us today as we consider the giving of our resources and our gifts to Grace United Methodist Church. As we consider how to best live into God's expectation of generosity and abundance, let us first remember that our immediate reality is not the whole story.

God is always doing something bigger, better, greater – something that leads us, our faith, our communities, to greater wholeness and hope. Embracing that reality – God's reality – can give us enough courage and strength to live and to create a world where others can also experience wholeness and hope. May it be so for you and for me as we seek to be both kingdom lovers and kingdom builders. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. On the throne of your heart, who is in control? How can the answer be 'Jesus' more of the time?
- 2) *Pray*. Where do you need to give Jesus kingship in your life? Pray for the strength to give this struggle or area of sin over to Jesus.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 27: 11-14. How is this account different than the one we read in John 18? What does John add to our understanding of Jesus?