

Scripture Lesson: John 18:33-38a

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 106-107

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 does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to 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?"

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

John 18:33-38a

11/24/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Not of This World"

Pastor Amy Terhune

In *Homiletics Magazine*, the story is told of a school superintendent and his family. They lived through a time of great tension between the School Board and the teachers' union. They even received threats that their home would be burned. Their son David had the highest SAT scores in the school, a triple A rating on the tuba, was extremely active in school functions, had an almost 97% average, yet was blackballed from the National Honor Society because of the feud between the administration and the teachers. His parents were heartbroken, but after some brief moments of anger and resentment, David announced to his parents: "I don't need them to tell me who I am." [from *Homiletics*, November 24, 1991. Illustrations for CTK Sunday on www.Sermons.com.]

Neither did Jesus. It is no wonder that our Lord was never intimidated or unsettled when He came face to face with lepers and prostitutes, with tax-collectors or wealthy merchants, and even with Herod or Caiaphas (the High Priest) or Pilate. With all these, Jesus was the same—his objective to win the world to the truth of God was the same, his sense of purpose and identity was the same. Jesus didn't need those around him to tell him who he was. And he doesn't need us to tell him either.

Unfortunately, we love to tell Jesus who he is. And too often, we remake Jesus in our image, confirming our prejudices and partialities so that we may hold them in good conscience. It's a constant danger, and always has been. The Jesus we meet in scripture is fully human. He exercises both grace and judgement or condemnation. He is gentle in some place and harsh in others. Sometimes the example of his love wrests tears from our eyes. Other times, he demands we feel the weight of our sin, and that is why we weep. He takes things as they come. He deals with people as they actually are, which is why his responses vary.

Earlier this week, T. Denise Anderson, who is the director of compassion, peace, and justice ministries for the Presbyterian Church (USA), wrote an article for *Christian Century*. I want to read to you some of what she wrote:

"In 1925, Pope Pius XI instituted the feast day of the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. To understand why he did this, we should consider what was happening in the world at the time. That year, Adolf Hitler had just published the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, which detailed his

descent into antisemitism and his sinister designs for world domination. The signing of the Locarno Treaties that year was met with disdain by German extremists, who viewed them as a betrayal of Germany and a weakening of its power and influence in the world. A year later, more than 40,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan marched on Washington to demand, among other things, immigration restrictions based on race and nationality. With membership of over 5 million at the time, the Klan was the largest fraternal organization in the United States.

“The world was still navigating the aftermath of the Great War, and there was growing nationalist sentiment around the globe. Pius XI wanted to counter what he perceived to be unhealthy nationalism and increased secularism. He called the church to declare Christ’s kingship over all creation. The Christian’s first allegiance is therefore to Christ, whatever the nation of their citizenship. Regardless of where in the world Christians live, they should be guided by their values as followers of Christ, over and above national movements or cultural ethics. [2 ¶s from <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/november-24-reign-christ-b-john-18-33-37>.]

Anderson does not pay due credit to the criticism Pius XI endured for declaring such a simple and solidly Biblical truth, but for Pius XI and many others, it was and is truth. Anderson does point out, and rightly so, that our world is trending in that direction again, as history so often does. And there are many around the world who justify their unwillingness to observe this day in anti-Catholic discourse, but I remain convinced that it has more to do with the discomfort of the topic than the man who instituted the observance in the first place. We want a Jesus who saves us from pain and grief, but not from our illusions and distortions. We want a Jesus who redeems us from our personal sin, but who doesn’t dabble in the social or systemic sin that works actively against any divine shaping that might help us better resemble the Kingdom of God in practice.

I also feel compelled to note that earlier this week, the church lost a great leader when Tony Campolo went home to be with God. He was an unabashed follower of Jesus Christ, who lived a prophetic ministry that often got him in trouble, namely because he called American Christians out on our greed. He called us out, not only on our failure to prioritize care for the poor, but on our tendency to demonize the poor as lazy, conniving, and unethical in order to justify our failure to care for them. “There are 2,000 verses of Scripture that call upon us to respond to the needs of the poor,” Campolo said. “And yet, I find that when Christians talked about values in this last election that was not on the agenda, that was not a concern. If you were to get the voter guide of the Christian Coalition, that doesn’t even rate.” Campolo was a courageous truth-teller. But he didn’t heed that call out of spite or obstinance. He found his life’s work in following and studying the life and words the One who came to testify to the truth. [see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/11/died-tony-campolo-red-letter-christian/>.]

When we turn to our Gospel lesson from John for this morning, I’ll admit that it seems wildly out of place. Here we are, ready to move towards Christmas, and we’re presented with part of the Crucifixion narrative. We’re all ready to hear about angels and shepherds. We’re prepared to hear about gratitude and the appropriateness of being thankful. The last place we want to be is back at Good Friday. But if we the church are called to examine today our testimony that Christ is indeed the King, it is appropriate to look at one of the only places in the Gospels where Christ himself addresses and defines his own Kingdom.

Jesus tells Pilate ‘my Kingdom is not of this world.’ We understand that to mean that the Kingdom of God is not like any government here on earth. It is not subject to corruption, to greed, to compromise, to in-fighting, intrigue, politics, and violence. In short, it is not subject to our human frailties, because it isn’t human, but divine. Yet while His Kingdom is not of this world, we do assert that Jesus Christ is the King of this world. “But that begs the question: what does it mean to say that Christ is King of this world? Knowing that the world as it currently exists is certainly not the kind of

world Christ desires, we cannot help but conclude that the world is unfinished. There is work yet to be done.” [adapted from “Christ the King” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] So when we say Christ is King, the first and most obvious thing we say about him is that we follow a working King. We follow a King who is intimately involved in the daily proceedings of this world.

One of the most beautiful historical legends that arose out of WWII is that King Christian of Denmark exercised resistance to Nazi occupation by ordering every Danish citizen to wear the yellow star of David in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors. Legend has it that the Danes complied, and King Christian could be seen on his morning walk each day in Copenhagen sporting that yellow star. In this way, the King identified with the least of his people in one of the greatest examples of peaceful protest of the modern era. It’s a moving story with a powerful point. The only problem is that it’s not true. Neither the Danish people nor their King ever donned those yellow stars.

What is true, however, is that Danish police, government officials, physicians, clergy, and other Danish citizens of all walks of life were paying attention to what was happening in Europe. By the time that Germany instituted martial law in Denmark in the summer of 1943, nearly all of Denmark’s 7000 Jews had been successfully evacuated by the Danish government itself to Sweden in fishing trollers and private vessels. 284 Danes were sent to Theresienstadt Concentration Camp in Czechoslovakia, and all but 35 or so of those survived to return to Denmark after the war was over. It’s important we understand that the great peaceful protest wasn’t symbolic. It wasn’t wearing a star. It was the hard work of diplomacy and the risk taken by hundreds of regular citizens like you and me that ferried their neighbors across open waters during war time to ensure their safety. That work is what the King of Denmark undertook, and that is what makes him heroic. It’s not the optics. It’s the work. [see <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/a-star-is-borne/>.]

We pledge our allegiance to a King at work in our world. Scripture tells us that the God of the universe neither slumbers nor sleeps. He is constantly working, patiently creating, relentlessly loving. We do not follow a King who deals with generalities and then goes out to play a game of golf while his underlings work out the details. God rolls up his sleeves and digs into the work of saving human life, one heart at a time. It’s painstaking work. Victories seem small, setbacks are regular. But God never loses hope, never stops seeing the best in each of us, never stops offering his hand, never quits working. We follow a King who never loses touch, a compassionate and loving King who wants nothing more than our wholeness. We follow a profoundly personal King.

But a second truth follows that. To say that Christ is King, is to say that Christ has power— power over this world and power over our lives. We follow the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We follow the creator of the universe, the master of time and eternity, the conqueror of death—a powerful King indeed. So I cannot stress this enough when I caution us that we dare not confuse a personal king with “pocket-sized” one that we can pull out in emergencies and put away when we’re done. Naturally, we’re supposed to have the Spirit of Christ reside in our hearts, but the whole point of that is that our hearts shouldn’t be able to contain him! That spirit ought to spill over into everything—the way we live, the way we make decisions, the way we treat others, the way we think about past, present, and future. C.S. Lewis captured this truth so beautifully in his Narnia Chronicles. Aslan, the great lion, is the allegorical representation of Christ in the children’s world. He is good. He is wise. He is loving. But as Mr. Tumnus points out to Lucy, he is not a tame lion. We can’t put him on a leash or in a cage. He doesn’t belong to us. We belong to him.

Here is the true mark of power—we follow the author of love. Love is the pinnacle and base of God’s power. Love is what sent Jesus to us. Love is what healed the sick and welcomed the outcast. And love is what led Jesus to the cross—love for us. Love is what defeated death and love is still what

drives his Holy Spirit to be among us. And love is what will ultimately usher in the Kingdom of God. This is the truth to which Jesus comes to testify, witness, and inaugurate.

Throughout John's gospel, Jesus takes the time to tell us who he is. Seven times, Jesus offers clear statements: I am.... I am bread, light, shepherd, gate, resurrection & life, true vine. And on the night before he's arrested, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Which suggests to me that the truth Jesus offers isn't an idea or a theory or a teaching. It's Jesus himself. Jesus gives himself.

Like Pilate, we must either accept Jesus' testimony or deny it. Either we pick up Christ's witness to the world, or we cry out with the Jewish leaders, "we have no king but Caesar". We must decide. But be fair warned: if he is our King, then we are not members of a democracy. We cannot vote on whether or not we will love others as we are loved. We are not entitled to comfort, wealth, privilege, or even safety. We do not earn saving grace, and we cannot plead the 5th when we come before his throne.

"What is truth?" Pilate wants to know. "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Made the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the leper clean. He's walked on water, feed 5000, calmed the storm, raised the dead. He's challenged the authorities of scripture and beat them at their own game. He's turned over money tables, foreseen the destruction of the temple, saved a woman caught in adultery. He's done real and genuine good. He's also pushed some really sensitive buttons that needed pushing. What has he done? What is truth? They're not the right questions. If Pilate really wants to get at what makes Jesus such a threat, he'd do better to stick with his original line of questioning: who are you? Are you the king of the Jews? Because truth isn't a what, but a who. Cynical and far too pragmatic for deep truth, Pilate has no interest in the truth Jesus offers – the truth of his own life. But that's not what ultimately relevant for today. What matters is how you answer the question. Are you the king of the Jews? Of the world? Of my heart? Of my life? I know how I answer that question. How would you answer it?

Amen.