

So You Are a King?

John 18:33-38

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Fred Craddock once told this little parable:

After the vote, the minister called to your church and was thrilled to death. The van unloaded him at the parsonage. The chairperson of the pulpit committee had him and his family over in their backyard as they cooked hamburgers. The church filled the pantry with food; they moved in the furniture. It was great.

They stood around the barbecue grill, and the young pastor said, "You can't imagine what a delight it is to come to a church and know that you've been elected and chosen to come by unanimous vote."

The fellow flipping the hamburgers said, "Well, it was practically unanimous."

"Well, what do you mean, 'practically unanimous'?"

"Well, it was *practically* unanimous."

"Well, what do you mean, 'practically unanimous'?"

"Well, let's just say that it was unanimous."

"Well, but what... what was it really?"

"Well, it was 234 to 2."

To two? I wonder who the two are? The next six months he spends finding out who the two are, and then the next six months trying to please those two. At the end of the year, he is fired — 2 in favor of him, 234 against (*Craddock Stories*, 42-43).

Who is it that we really want to serve?

In our scripture passage this morning, two kinds of kingdoms are squaring off. Two kinds of kings are standing toe-to-toe. They represent two ways of living in this world, and they are both vying for *your* loyalty.

Pilate must have wondered to himself what kind of king this was. Jesus didn't look the part. He didn't have an entourage. He wasn't encircled in security. No one carried his bags for him. He didn't carry himself with that air of self-importance the way lords do.

When the religious leaders had finished with Jesus, but wanted somebody else to do their dirty work for them, they threw him at the doorstep of Pilate — the *prefect* or governor assigned to Jerusalem by Rome.

Pilate met them at the door, but then brings Jesus into his headquarters in order to question him in private.

Pilate asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?” A simple yes or no will do. If he says yes, then he’s guilty of insurrection and treason under Roman law, because there is only one king in Rome, and his name is Caesar. The penalty is death.

Pilate is trying to get *the facts* lined up, so that he can properly adjudicate Jesus’ guilt or innocence. But Jesus is less interested in the facts than he is in *the truth*.

Instead of answering, Jesus asks Pilate a question in return, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” He wants to know what *Pilate* believes to be true. “Are you asking for *you* or for *them*?”

Pilate goes back to putting facts in their places: “I am not a Jew. Your nation and your chief priests handed you over to me. I didn’t ask for this, but here we are. So what did you do to make them do that?”

And as if he’s answering the question he wished Pilate had asked, Jesus says: “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would have turned to violence — just like your kingdom does all the time. But my kingdom is not from this place.”

“Ahhh,” says Pilate trying to get back to the-facts-and-just-the-facts, please. “You said *kingdom*. So you are a *king*?”

You can almost see Jesus rub his temples in frustration. “*You* say that I am a king. But I came into this world to testify to *truth*. Everyone who belongs to truth *listens* to my voice.”

Pilate is an officer in an empire. He knows how kingdoms work. He knows how they manipulate the truth to incite loyalty. He knows that when it comes to politics, “the truth” is always pliable. He asks, “What is truth?”

There is sometimes a world of difference between knowing *the facts* and knowing *the truth*.

Based on the facts he had, Ptolemy told us that the sun goes around the earth, which it obviously does from our subjective point of view. Go stand outside and watch the sun for a day and it will rise in the east and set in the west, and — if you didn’t know better — you might reach the same conclusion as Ptolemy.

But along came Galileo telling us the truth — that the earth is not the center of our galaxy. The sun is. And it is we who circle around it and not the other way around. That is the truth. But sometimes power isn't so interested in learning the truth, because truth often requires a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking... and a new way of being in the world

The facts as Pilate could see them were this:

- The city was filled with Jewish pilgrims because it was Passover.
- Passover was the celebration of when God delivered the Israelites from Egypt.
- Many Jews saw Rome as the new Egypt, and so every year when Passover came tensions ran high — so high that Pilate often called in extra troops to keep the Jewish people in their place.
- The Jewish religious leaders wanted this Jesus character dead, and they had the *power* to stir the crowd into a frenzy and cause a riot.
- If the Jewish people rioted, Pilate would look weak and could lose his position in the Roman court.

So, with those facts in mind, Pilate had a choice to make: he could let Jesus go free and all hell would break loose, or he could keep the peace and save his own hide... but he'd have to kill an innocent man to do it.

The truth is, the kingdom of God stands in near absolute opposition to the kingdoms of this world.

The kingdoms we devise are always about securing safety, comfort, wealth, and health. If you don't think that's true, during the next presidential election cycle, watch the debates and listen for those exact talking points. Nearly everything our presidential hopefuls will promise you could be categorized in one of those buckets: safety, comfort, wealth, and health:

Tax breaks? Wealth.

Better infrastructure? Comfort.

The best healthcare opportunities in the world? Health.

Secure borders? Safety.

That is the job of the world's kingdoms — to promise safety, comfort, wealth, and health for their citizens. And aren't we fortunate to live in a place with such priorities? But Jesus' kingdom isn't of this world. In fact his kingdom runs in the other direction.

Our king doesn't promise us wealth. Instead, he tells us to give it away — and says that our wealth is often what's standing between us and God.

Our king doesn't promise safety. Instead, he says things like, "turn the other cheek."

Our king doesn't promise comfort. Instead, says things like, "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

If the nature of the world's kingdoms could be captured by a single story from scripture, I think it would have to be the tower of Babel. You remember, don't you? People came together and built a tower higher and higher, so high, in fact, that it was reaching for heaven itself. And what was the goal? It was to make a name for *themselves* – not to make a name for God, but for themselves. It was, in essence, to become gods – to make themselves into gods.

Who needs God if we can build a tower to heaven ourselves?

But the movement of the tower of Babel is headed in the wrong direction. The tower of Babel says we can build our way to heaven. And isn't that the message of the world's kingdoms?

But in the gospel story, it all runs the other direction. If the story of Babel is about how the kingdoms of this world try to build their way up to heaven, the gospel is the story of how God stooped down to earth to bring heaven to us.

We call it the incarnation – and at its core, the incarnation is the story of a God who chose downward mobility, in order to reveal his true nature and his deepest desire for his people.

As a young man, Eugene Peterson and his wife, Jan, planted Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland. He said that early on, he had grand visions of building a beautiful church edifice to honor the title *Christ our King* Presbyterian Church, and that he planned to fill it with good, noble, devoted Christians. He says, "Imagine my surprise, when all God would send me were apathetic, distracted, and, often, very broken Christians."

Even worse, for the first several years, there was no beautiful edifice to honor the name, Christ our King Presbyterian Church. Instead, they met in Peterson's unfinished basement – concrete floor, cinderblock walls, and six little windows lining the top of the basement's perimeter. During the week, he and Jan strung lines across the space to hang their laundry. On Sunday, they took the clotheslines down, put up metal folding chairs and tried desperately to forget they were in a dingy basement.

Peterson became convinced the that whole situation was an absolute embarrassment – a humiliating insult to the title, Christ our King. But one day his whole perspective changed.

"After we had been worshipping in this bare, unadorned basement for about four months, Ruth, a vivacious sixteen-year-old, said to me as she was leaving after the

benediction one Sunday, 'I love worshipping in this place! I feel like one of the early Christians in the catacombs.'"

Some of her friends over heard her and they gave their church a new nickname: "Catacombs Presbyterian Church." At first Peterson says he was offended by the thought. But then it occurred to him how wrong he'd been. Where would Jesus be found? Not in a fancy, ornate temple — but in some old, tired basement. Not in some lofty throne room, but in the catacombs (*The Pastor*, 109-110).

He wanted a beautiful church, but while he was daydreaming of his beautiful church, Jesus was busy showing up at Catacombs Presbyterian.

And isn't that just like our king to show up right where we wouldn't expect him?

We talk about the incarnation being necessary, and, indeed, it was. But too often we think it was necessary because of sin and sinfulness. I suspect that's not as true as we might like to believe.

I think the incarnation was necessary because God's love needed to become tender. It needed to become tenderness in the flesh, so that we might finally understand the tender nature of God.

In his book *Mortal Lessons*, the medical doctor, Richard Selzer, writes, "I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her face; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks.

'Yes,' I say, 'it will. It is because the nerve was cut.'

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.

'I like it,' he says, 'It is kind of cute.'

All at once, I *know* who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see as he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works" (*Mortal Lessons*, 45-46).

Friends, that is a perfect image of the incarnation. And it is why we celebrate Christ the King Sunday – because on this day, we remember that our King stooped down and took on the shape of our lives in order to love us.

He became the thing that we are, so that we might just know what is *true* in this world and what matters most.

And he invites us to join him in his kingdom, where the poor are invited to dine with kings, prodigals have parties thrown in their honor, and people like you and me are invited to serve as prefects of God's love.

It is Christ the King Sunday. Who do you really want to serve?

Amen.