

John 18:33-37

18:33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

18:34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

18:35 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?"

18:36 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."

18:37 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."

Not of This World

Where are we this morning, and why are we here?

Let me begin with liturgical answers.

99 years ago, in 1925, Pope Pius XI declared the Feast of Christ the King. We know it today as Reign of Christ Sunday. WWI had finally ended, and nations were jockeying to remake structures of security and provision for millions of people trying to piece their lives back together, and it

also seems that secularism was on the rise. Pope Pius wanted to remind Christians of God's everlasting dominion in Creation, and reacclimate their hearts, minds, souls, and strength toward God-centered pursuits. He wanted us to ask, "Who's ultimately in charge?" His foresight was telling – in a few years fascism would sweep through Europe, and in a large part, because of the Church's silence.

And where are we in our gospel reading?

The clash of God's world with that of Caesar's is nothing new. The earliest Israelites, somehow longed for Pharaoh's rations, even as they were freed from his oppression. And in today's text, Jesus, is brought before Pilate, a political leader, on charges of a religious nature: sacrilege. Do you see the tragic irony? The Temple establishment is so angered and threatened by Jesus' modern expressions of Torah – which are strangely authentic, ancient and original in their form by the way – that they want him gone. Removed. Exterminated. Except nothing in their covenantal living, nothing in their policy-making, nothing in their interpretative methods can convict Jesus. They need Pilate to do their nastiness.

And what we have here in today's pericope is a snippet of an extended conversation with Pilate and Jesus, where Pilate just can't make any sense of why he's even here with Jesus in the first place. Pilate's not religious. He's not even remotely concerned about Jewish polity. Pilate is just irritated that someone would dare assign kingship to the likes of Jesus, and his sole focus will be interrogating Jesus on political motives: "Are you a threat to my authority?"

The most famous question of this discourse happens a little later. Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" For many years, I read Pilate's question as a

mocking question. As if truth had no value to him, as if truth was something to be dismissed. But lately, I tend to believe his question was one of sincere curiosity: “No really, tell me, what is truth? I struggle to grasp this concept!” I don’t believe Pilate was ever equipped or engaged enough to grasp truth. And what a thing, to feel a sense of empathy for a heart that cannot be unhardened. And how tragic for someone to finally grasp hold of a perceived power that still leaves them wanting. How tragic to believe that one can simply wash their hands of their subjects, to believe they ought only be invested up to the point where a lack of subservience festers into annoyance and anger. How hard it must be to never feel whole, to never feel like you’ve got enough, even when you have so much.

In any event, we read portions of the trial every year about this time. And we usually draw a few similar conclusions. 1) It’s remarkable that throughout our scriptures, pharaohs, kings, governors, high priests, and other chosen authorities – the very people who ought to be the definitive authority on ultimate authority and truth – struggle, and mightily, to identify the power, presence, and purpose of God, even when all three are right in front of them. 2) Even the most faithful disciples struggle with a mighty tension: we claim the Lordship of Christ, an utter dependence on a benevolent Creator, all the while desirous of the privilege and protection Caesar can offer.

I’m gonna mix my Gospels. Penalize me half a letter grade if you must. But for some unknown reason, I keep thinking of Matthew’s gospel this morning. Chapter Five to be precise. The part right after the Beatitudes, where Jesus speaks on hedging our anger – that is living in ways that resolve conflict before it festers into violence, and deep woundedness, and intractable brokenness.

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:21-26).

Not just Christians, but every human being is created by God, and reconciled – that is fused, reunited, merged, bonded, grafted, love-bound – reconciled to God. And because we are reconciled to God, we are reconciled to one another. We have a connection of vital and ultimate importance. And we see, here in this narrative, the damage, the pain, the chaos that ensues, when we, beloved members of community, bound in reconciliation, and bound in covenant, place our dependence, our allegiance, and our primary trust upon agents disinterested in the Grand Reconciliation in order to resolve our differences. Caesar’s authority is not only fleeting, but it is always, always, always disinterested in achieving wholeness. Its aim may be peace, but it’s a brutal, inequitable peace.

I’m not a pessimist by nature. But honestly, I’m not sure what to keep telling you on Reign of Christ Sunday. The truth is, I’ll never inherit this

pulpit on a Sunday morning when the nations of men (yes, I'm intentional in my gendering here!), are anything but indifferent to the reconciling purpose of our Creator. Because that's not what nations have been created to do – they have their own motives, and their own interests to protect. But the imperfect nature of nations has never, is never, can never, will never be an indictment upon God. In any age, in every age, we have got to, GOT TO, stop expecting an authority of nations that nations are incapable of assuming. The peace that passes understanding – this authority is only, ONLY available in God, and a Creation reconciled to God and neighbor.

Jesus said it this way: “Stop trying to make worldly sense of a kinship that's not of this world. It won't ever compute.”

And here, I suppose, is where I find my hope. Our little enclave of Raleigh, this experiment and expression of faith we've called Millbrook Baptist Church for 149 years, is intended to be a space where we can be reconciled to one another. Ideally, ours, even if only in fleeting moments, is a community guided more by the principles of empathy, grace, and charity than by those of finance, policy, and power; ours are a people, who in their best moments, are not bound by the rigidity of Torah, nor the staleness of tradition, nor by the winds of social whims, but rather, by the movement of the Spirit. In our best moments, there are these pockets and spaces where God reaches right into our souls, opens our hearts, frees us to be vulnerable, and reveals the frailties and strengths, the joys and sorrows, all the humanity within us. A discovery of our true selves; A discovery of our interdependence; our discovery that we all matter to the world in some way. That there is deep meaning and appreciation for each life among us.

This kind of transcendence is not something to be financed or purchased, nor to be voted on, and enacted into policy, nor to be imposed or enforced. It's not efficient. It's not measurable. It's not of this world. And yet it remains our North Star.

On Stewardship Sunday, I'd be inclined to tell you that these kinship moments require every resource we can give: our tithes, our time, our talents, and most especially our presence and spirit. And I do pray, daily, that each of you would deem such moments both for yourselves and others worthy of your treasures. Because I believe, and always will believe, that the world's a better place because Millbrook Baptist Church is in it.

As your pastor, I also resonate with your anxiety about our long-term health. Because that trend of rising secularism that Pope Pius warned about doesn't appear to be reversing, and that means less people and less resources to imagine how we might keep incubating these kinship moments.

But guess what? It's not Stewardship Sunday, well at least not THE Stewardship Sunday. It's Reign of Christ Sunday. As another part of my pastoral duties, I'm inclined to remind you of a bigger, bolder, better, broader picture. God's gonna do what's God's gonna do with Millbrook Baptist Church. It's not beholden to the Dow Jones Industrial Average. It's not beholden to who gets inaugurated every four years. It's not beholden to the bandwidth of our Wi-Fi. It's not beholden to all these worldly things that tie us in knots.

I believe God faiths in our faithfulness. Whatever our expression of Millbrook may be in the future, however robust or minimal, frequent or infrequent, structured or fluid, as long as they are rooted in a spirit of

kinship, they're gonna be enough. They're gonna be beautiful. They're gonna wonderful. They're not gonna be of this world. And that's exactly how it should be.

I'll close with one more thought. The season of Advent starts tomorrow. And you know how? With two first-time, expecting mothers, one deemed too old, and one deemed too young. Not a nickel to spare. Void of influence and privilege. Not a pro forma statement, visioning document, nor capital campaign in site. And these two had church together, maybe even an extended revival, right up until their delivery dates. And here we are, still talking about, Emmanuel, God-with-Us, two thousand years later.

Pharaoh, Caesar, Pilate, they can have their world. I'm gonna put my attention on the things not of this world. May our hearts do the same. And may our love be reflected in this world and the next. And may it all be soon! Amen.