

## **November 24-25, 2018, Reign of Christ Sunday, St Lucas UCC**

### **Sermon**

John Steinbeck wrote, "Power doesn't corrupt. Fear corrupts...perhaps the fear of a loss of power." In John 18 and the subsequent passages related to Jesus' trial and crucifixion, we witness this type of corruption thoroughly at play; corruption born of the fear of losing power and privilege; corruption that even the incarnate truth of God cannot seem to break. Power and privilege can become our primary allegiance, while we deny the truth of God set before us; that worldly power and privilege is all an illusion and only the Lordship of Christ can lead us to the Kingdom we all long to dwell in.

At this point in the gospel story, Jesus has been arrested, put on trial by Jewish leadership, then delivered to Pilate under the charges that Jesus has claimed himself to be God's son and their king. They deliver him to Pilate because they themselves do not have the power to put him to death. Pilate then begins to question Jesus, and it is this exchange that is our passage today.

Now, Pilate has been told Jesus professes himself to be a king. This poses a particular problem for Pilate, then. As the Roman governor of this part of the empire, he is tasked with maintaining Rome's power, and quelling anything or anyone that may threaten it. He has the authority, and under Rome the responsibility, to maintain order and Roman power by whatever means necessary, including brutality and violence. Should he fail to do so, he risks losing his own power, and likely his life. So here he is confronted with someone who possibly claims kingship, and this is a threat to Rome, as for them there was no other king but Cesar and anyone who suggested otherwise may be preparing to rise against Rome. All of this being the case, Pilate is fearful; fearful for a loss of his own power, and fearful for the loss of Roman power and authority in the region. And freighted with this blinding fear he begins questioning Jesus with the most pertinent question: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus then inquires if Pilate came to this on his own accord or if others had made that claim, to which Pilate responds, "I am not a Jew am I? Your own nation and chief priests have handed you over to me. What've you done?" Jesus responds, "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."

This statement from Jesus has a couple of implications. First, it's a hint at his kingship. He doesn't outright claim it, but he does speak of his kingdom. Secondly, the kingdom of which he speaks operates under different values and in a different manner than kingdoms of the world. If this were not the case, as he says, his followers would be fighting for him, violently rising against Rome. Where kingdoms of the world are rooted in violence, domination, and the maintenance of power, the Kingdom of Christ, the Kingdom of God, does not operate in such ways, thus those who live under Christ's reign, who follow him, reject such ways of operating as well. But there's more.

Again, Pilate pushes for a clear answer, a confession, that Jesus is a king, to which Jesus responds, "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." The Kingdom of Christ transcends borders, again setting it apart from anything the world knows, and yet it does exist in the world among those who belong to the truth and live following the voice of Christ. Emily Townes writes, "In religious terms, [truth] expands to an unwavering conformity with God's will so that we think in terms of reality and understanding. In the New Testament, it is possible to speak of truth as something that is done rather than something that is simply believed or thought of. Indeed, it is possible to set truth in contrast to unrighteousness. For contemporary Christians, the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ takes precedence over all other

human understandings of truth.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus says he was born to testify to the truth, which is to say that in his living and teaching, he revealed God’s truth and will for life, and when those who live under his Lordship reveal such truth in their living, showing they belong to the truth, the Kingdom is in the world, and indeed the kingdoms of the world built on violence and domination weaken. Robert Bryant writes, “On the surface, Jesus asserts that his kingdom presents no threat to Roman rule and power. As John and the other Gospels reveal, however, Jesus’ rule and kingdom are profoundly subversive to any worldly authority that demands allegiance over loyalty to God. The religious leaders [who turned Jesus over, in part themselves acting out of fear seeking to protect their own power and privilege, and who would later claim they have no king but Cesar] have come to recognize this; Pilate does not yet see it.”<sup>2</sup> Do we?

This text raises for us some tough questions, questions I do not raise lightly or flippantly, and questions only you can answer. This is Reign of Christ Sunday, the day the church announces it bows only to Jesus the Christ, and does not give allegiance to any other person, principality, or power claiming to be sovereign.<sup>3</sup> This text, on this day, beckons us to self-reflection, both as individual disciples and as a congregation. Will our own fears, perhaps those of losing power or privilege, prevent us from living out God’s truth of love, grace, justice, and peace? Or are we, with our whole beings, dedicated to the truth revealed in Christ? Are we, above all else, committed to following Christ’s direction and participating in the Kingdom of God breaking into the world?

At the moment, fears and anxieties are running high. The flames of nationalism, which elevates country above all else, are being stoked here and around the world. Fears stoked against minorities and immigrants have led to steady rises in hate crimes, and now we are prepared to meet unarmed asylum seekers with the military, equipped with the authority to use deadly force if necessary. Mass shootings continue to occur with frightening regularity, putting us all on edge, even as we attend church or send our children to school, while our lawmakers do nothing in the fears they will lose their power and privilege. When it comes to mainline churches such as ours, fears and anxieties of decline threaten to guide our mission at the expense of the mission God would have us carry out, and the community God would call us to be. No doubt we each also carry anxieties in our lives that may prevent us from following where our Good Shepherd King would lead us. So, what voice shall we follow? What truth will we dedicate ourselves to? We can allow these worldly forces and fears to rule over us and dictate our actions while they continue to cause suffering and death for our neighbors and creation, or we can reject them, and truly, wholly submit to the Lordship of Christ, living out his Kingdom’s values and the truth he reveals to us that shows us a way to be in the world that leads to true life for us and the world entire. In such a time as this, we can be a source of life-giving change, of courage, of truth, of love, of hope, and such is our calling, but following that path is a choice, and one we have to continually make. Indeed, no matter what our past holds, Christ continually invites us to be led by the Shepherding King into abundant life; to submit ourselves to living under the Reign of Christ in faith and trust. We can have faith and trust in the truth our Lord revealed and the reign that began with his presence on earth. For even though the fearful powers Jesus confronted put him to death, there was resurrection; there was new life! The resurrection reveals the truth of Jesus’ life, teaching, and witness. The resurrection reveals the truth that God’s will shall never be stopped, and God’s will for the world will one day come to be. And every time people of the truth live out God’s will,

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Townes, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2* (Propers 17-Reign of Christ), ed. David Bartlett, (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 11848-11851.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bryant, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2* (Propers 17-Reign of Christ), ed. David Bartlett, (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 11959-11962.

<sup>3</sup> Pete Peery, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2* (Propers 17-Reign of Christ), ed. David Bartlett, (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 12007-12008.

the world inches ever closer to the fullness of the Kingdom coming into being, and the forces of fear and death retreat a little more. May we hear our call to Kingdom living clearly, hear Christ's voice of truth, and boldly submit to it, moment by moment, proclaiming Christ our one true king always.