

Kingdom Truth
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year, a Sunday we call Christ the King. The Christian year begins with Advent when we prepare ourselves once more for the coming of the Messiah in the birth of Jesus. The year ends today as we celebrate that the child born in Bethlehem is King David's greater son. Jesus is the true King: King of kings and Lord of lords. The morning lesson comes from John's Gospel when Jesus and Pilate talk about what it means to be a king. So let's read it in John 18.

John 18.33-38a (NRSV)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" 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?" 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." 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." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Introduction

Sometimes preachers put a heavy philosophical and Shakespearean accent on Pilate's question. With great agony they would ask, *what is TRUTH?!?!?* I don't think that's the way Pilate asked it.

Pilate was a politician, not a philosopher. Politicians know that there are as many truths as there are constituents or vested interests. They know truth is whatever those in power define it to be. We live in a time when even the idea of truth is problematic and we are much more likely to get *truthiness* from our politicians—to use Stephen Colbert's term—than anything we could really call truth. But Jesus said those who belong to the truth listen to him. When Pilate asked about truth I think he was wistfully wondering if truth could really be so simple as just listening to Jesus.

Still, Pilate couldn't see the simple truth. Jesus talked about a kingdom but Pilate saw nothing that looked royal to him. For Pilate kingdoms had to do with power and armies and control. He saw none of those things in Jesus and he missed the whole point. On this Christ the King Sunday, let's make sure we don't miss the point. In the very brief time we have today, let's ask just one question: what is the truth of the kingdom, that is, what is *kingdom truth*?

The kingdom is not from this world

The truth of the kingdom is that it is not from this world. Jesus was very clear about that. He rules a kingdom that does not have its origin or source of power or purpose from this world. The kingdom of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ is not from this world and that has profound

implications for how you and I should live if we want to be citizens of that kingdom.

First, it means we cannot act regally. Christ is King but we are not. Christ is King but a few hours after talking with Pilate he died on the cross and that death has a great deal to do with the character and quality of his kingdom. It is not for us to act regally and grasp for power and clout.

That has always been my fundamental argument with some on the so-called Religious Right. They want to have clout. They want to have power. They want to be able to stop things they disagree with. They want to have the kind of authority that Pilate assumed he had. But that *was not* and, I believe, *is not* Jesus' way.

Of course, there are a lot of faithful Christians on the Religious Right and the Religious Left and the Religious Middle. Religious conservatives, moderates, and liberals have far more in common than they are usually willing to admit. But I resist *any* perspective's grasp for clout and power because that is a worldly impulse. The church has always blundered when it has taken on the trappings or appearance or the pretensions of power. We have a King and he said his kingdom was not of this world.

Was Jesus talking about some kingdom in heaven—pie in the sky by and by? No! He was talking about a kingdom that does not follow the ways of this world, that does not grasp for power. He said if his kingdom were from this world his followers would fight. Fighting is the way of this world. But Jesus' kingdom is different. Jesus' kingdom does not accept that the rich should rule. Jesus' kingdom does not accept that the famous are more important than the poor. His kingdom does not accept that power and success are the fulfillment of life. No, Jesus' kingdom is based on the kind of love that suffers and dies for the sake of others. It is not for us to act regally when even our King did not.

Second, it means we must act spiritually. That Jesus' kingdom is not from this world means we must not act regally but we must act spiritually. That means we don't live by values which come from the world. Instead we live by values that come from God.

That means being generous givers. Our stewardship campaign is based on the premise that we all can and should increase our generosity. It may be a modest increase but an increase is important. Why? Because we belong to the kingdom of Christ and as kingdom people we are ordering our lives by spiritual values that don't come from the world. The world tells you to make all you can and keep what you have or spend it on yourselves and enjoy the toys it will buy. But the kingdom speaks of a different economy and asks us where we put our faith—in the world and in things, or in God? If we are God's people, we will give generously.

We will also be prayers. If we live in the kingdom, we need to be people who pray. The world is so noisy. A cacophonous babble of noise everywhere assaults our souls and drowns out the still, small voice that speaks to us of eternity. To be prayerful people is not to deny the beauty and wonder of this world. Praying people love the world and embrace the world because they know intimately the Creator who long ago with a song of love spun the worlds into being. God's people are praying people.

Finally, if we are spiritual people, we must worship. Worship is the single most important thing to help us get beyond our own selfish lives. For when we worship we always offer God our praise. When we worship we always confess: "God, I am a sinner." When we worship we always thank God for undeserved mercy. When we worship we always hear the Word and we hear it better when we are not by ourselves. And when we worship we are always together for God calls us to be a

people, not a bunch of individuals. The world would say nothing of importance happens here. But kingdom people worship and know it's the most important thing of all.

Kingdom truth means Christ's kingdom is not from this world. Therefore, we cannot live regally and we must act spiritually.

Conclusion

Quite a few years ago Merrie and I attended a Garth Brooks concert. I don't know if you liked Garth Brooks when he was performing a lot. Merrie was a bigger fan than I was but we both thought it would be fun to see him in a live performance. He did put on quite a show and I was glad we were there.

But one of the things that impressed me the most had nothing to do with the concert. It impressed me so much that I still remember this more than just about anything else from that evening. During intermission, I noticed a man, probably in his late twenties, standing some 15 or 20 rows from us. Everyone around him had gone to get a drink or something and he was just standing there by himself—dressed exactly like Garth Brooks. He had on Garth cowboy boots and Garth blue jeans and a Garth shirt and a Garth cowboy hat. And he was standing there dressed exactly like Garth, looking around and just hoping, so it seemed, people would notice him.

I was actually a little saddened to see that. Why would a grown man need to dress up just like Garth Brooks? Children dress up like their heroes or heroines. But what was a grown man doing? What need was being met by dressing like Garth Brooks?

Then it dawned on me. We all dress up our lives in one way or another. It may not be as obvious as dressing like Garth Brooks. But we all dress according to the truth of the kingdom to which we are loyal. We all dress our lives in one way or another.

Dear friends, the only way that will endure is when we dress up like our King, Jesus the Christ, and dress our souls and live our lives in likeness to the kingdom of Christ. May the clothing of our souls point to a kingdom of truth that is not of this world, even the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords.