

Sermon on John 18:33-37
Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

It is one of the strangest, most dramatic scenes in all scripture. Pontius Pilate, the all-powerful governor – the representative of Roman power and the voice of the Emperor in this dusty province in the far corner of the Empire – seated as judge, juror and executioner of Jesus of Nazareth, who stood before him, bound and condemned by the high priests of the Temple. Pilate didn't want to deal with him at all – he was accused of a crime he didn't even understand – *blasphemy before God* (what in the world was that?). He understood theft, murder, corruption or treason against the Emperor – but *blasphemy*? But Jesus' enemies wanted him dead, and they didn't have the power to kill him, so they had brought Jesus to Pilate, on trumped up charges of *treason*. So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus shot right back, "Are you asking me, or did others tell you about me?" So Pilate answered – "Your own people turned you over to me. What have you done?" Then Jesus answered, "*My kingdom is not from this world.*"

So what is Jesus saying here? Often when we have heard this, we hear that Jesus' kingdom is not located here, in this world. That Pilate, Caesars, kings and queens, presidents and police hold power in this world – an earthly realm where we live, but Jesus reigns in heaven, which is somewhere else. We're not sure where. Maybe in some spiritual dimension, or up in space, above the clouds, but not here. Which gives us Christians a chance to say that Jesus, and hence God, is out of sight, out of mind. You can't see, hear, or feel God – or Jesus' presence in the world, so maybe God's not around at all. Irrelevant to what is going on around us – a God to whom we can pray, but it doesn't count until after we die and "go to heaven". Where ever that is! So we pray to God: "*your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven*" and hope that God hears, because we feel so separated from God, like Jesus is on some other planet.

Except I don't think that is what Jesus is saying at all. I believe that Jesus is saying that "my kingdom isn't anything *like* your kingdom", in a world where kings and queens, dictators and presidents build power in order to assert control over others, get their way or get things done. And for most of them, that power is acquired and used through acts of violence. Jesus is standing before Pontius Pilate, the symbol of Roman power, seemingly another victim – bound, scourged and beaten by his Roman guards – about to be sentenced to death by crucifixion, a most cruel and violent death. Jesus is saying "my kingdom", my source of power, is not the same as yours, in fact it is nothing like your kingdom, your power. Jesus' kingdom and power have their basis in the power and presence of God –

available only through faith, not by coercion, deceit, or bribe. Jesus' power has nothing to do with violence – with power “over”, but has everything to do with relationship, with God and with all who follow him. Pilate wouldn't recognize such a kingdom.

It's hard enough for you and me – people of faith – to recognize or imagine the kingdom Jesus describes. In recent days we have been consumed by the effects and fear of violence. It is the age-old method for showing and gaining power – through violence – and in the “civilized” world we seek to control and tame violence so that we can live together in peace and safety. Living in peace requires us to be in relationship, to trust one another, and to live according to rules and expectations that we have agreed are essential. That peace is constantly threatened.

This past week we have found ourselves and our security threatened by the unfathomable violence of terrorism, in Paris, in Beirut, in Baghdad, and just yesterday in Mali. All the rules and expectations that hold us together have been broken by those who kill indiscriminately with suicide bombs strapped around their waists, who shoot to kill innocent bystanders while they eat, listen to music, or sit in conversation. It horrifies us, because it plays to our fear of the unknown, that we can imagine ourselves or others being killed as we do those things that we do every day, minding our own business.

We thought that we would solve the problem of the violence of terrorism after 9-11, when we drove Al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan and invaded Iraq, to get rid of Saddam Hussein. We have spent 14 years fighting terrorists, killing many, but all we did was drive them underground, and increase their numbers.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of this mistake of fighting violence with violence in his book *Where Do We Go From Here*, written in 1967, a year before he died. King wrote,

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” (p. 62)

We also have become much more aware of the violence under which whole communities live in our own city, as we heard of the shooting of a young African American man by police in Minneapolis last Sunday. His death might have been just a “brief blip” in the news cycle, had not the Black Lives Matter movement taken hold of the police account of what happened and publicly questioned it.

Because hundreds of people in north Minneapolis held vigils, demonstrations, occupied the Minneapolis 4th precinct, and shut down freeways (without violence) – we have all been forced to stop, look, and listen to what many African Americans in this community live with every day. And it's not just about Jamar Clark's life and death. It is really about the poverty, the lack of jobs, the wasted lives of young black men, the police who harass them, an achievement gap in city schools and the "school to prison pipeline" which takes the unfulfilled dreams of children, breaks them down, and sends them to prison, without hope for rehabilitation. THAT is what the protests, anger, and demonstrations are really about – it's not about Jamar Clark, it's about the despair in which a whole community lives while the rest of society ignores them and goes on with our own lives. Well, that is not acceptable, so the community is protesting loudly – angrily – but peacefully, without a shot being fired, a house or a car being burned. But it is so much more peaceful than some of the demonstrations by drunken college students after a victory in hockey or some other sport, across town on University Avenue. Nobody has been hurt in a week of demonstrations – in a community with a reputation for drive-by shootings.

So I found Plymouth Avenue on Friday, outside of the Minneapolis Police Precinct #4 one of the most peaceful neighborhoods in the Twin Cities! I went there to see for myself what the fuss was all about on the news media, and found small groups of mostly Black people of all ages gathered around mobile fire pits, with tents pitched for sleeping, and canopies over tables laden with food. I witnessed heated conversations with police (more like heated discussions over dinner, or a classroom debate, but with more colorful language!). I also saw families and individuals bringing warm clothing for cold nights, firewood for the fires, and food of all kinds, to donate for those standing vigil outside the police station. Pizza, fried chicken, chips and salsa, cookies baked by elderly white women at home, and dozens of sweet potato pies brought by a local family business. More food than anyone could eat, all given freely, with a smile, to build community, and to just celebrate being together. In north Minneapolis! It was a far cry from the television cameras and news reports that showed the chaos of demonstrators and police from the night before.

And later Friday afternoon there was a prayer vigil, kicked off by Professor Nekima Levy-Pounds, the African American law professor and president of the Minneapolis NAACP who has gained such notoriety for leading the demonstrations at the Mall of America and being arrested on I-94 after the crowd shut down the freeway last Sunday night. She was powerful, and she was happy, but hoarse, surrounded by a new community of hundreds of worshippers - black, white, young and old, clergy alongside young black men, women and teenagers, parents with their children, carrying candles, singing songs, praying at the place where Jamar Clark died. Gang members shook hands and stood guard against

white supremacists who said they were coming to shoot up the vigil. Instead of challenging the crowd, the police were standing aside, watching and protecting them from anyone who might disturb the peace – as it should be! And a whole new community – the “beloved community” arose, dreamed of by Martin Luther King, if only for a moment in time – created by love, basking in a tender peace. You could sense the presence of Christ. Could THIS be the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of? No – it was only a taste of it.

We know that we humans cannot build God’s kingdom on earth – only God can do that. We also believe and hope that one day Jesus will come to bring God’s kingdom in all its completeness and harmony – for without this hope we would despair! But sometimes we see glimpses of God’s kingdom, and the presence of Christ among us, when the light does shine in the world’s darkness. Like when people light candles and sing songs and hymns in Paris, in defiance of the terror and fear that terrorists tried to create, and people hug Muslims on the street. When nations open their borders and take in refugees who are fleeing the destruction and death from civil war in their home countries of Syria and Iraq, disregarding their own fear, because it is the humane thing to do – and Christ calls us to *love your neighbor*, God commands the faithful to *welcome the stranger*. When churches open their doors to families experiencing homelessness and offer a place to sleep; when communities open doors to hungry families to feed and clothe them.

We see the greatest example of all in Christ’s willingness to face his accusers and point out the failure of religious and political leaders to care for their people, against God’s commandments. Jesus was willing to die on a cross, not to shrink from it in fear, as the unavoidable consequence of confronting the rulers of the kingdoms of this world, who only knew violence as a way to keep their power. But we see in the raising of Jesus from the dead, that the power of violence, sin and death could not hold him. Now Jesus is alive, and he promises the same for us – life once more even after we die, which, of course, we will.

So today Jesus is present with us, where 2 or 3 of us have gathered, as he promised. He also is with us in the bread and the wine of the eucharist, when we gather together in his name to eat and drink. Jesus is present with us when we forgive our enemies, when we who are white stand with those who are black, or brown, or red, who have suffered so much from what we have taken or kept from them, and are still willing to accept our repentance and stand with us! That’s grace! That’s love! Jesus is present when we open our hearts and our borders to refugees fleeing death, when we share bread with our neighbors, when the community embraces its police with trust and the police stop looking at them with suspicion and protects everyone with equal justice under the law. So it is possible! Justice is done, repentance happens, forgiveness is given, love grows, joy results – and Jesus is present through it all. THAT is God’s kingdom among us, my friends!

But it is so totally unlike the world in which we live, that it is hard to recognize it when we actually experience it! So keep your eyes open, for God's kingdom to come!