

Gospel: John 18:33-37

In John's gospel, the story of Jesus and Pilate presents two different ways of exercising power: through force or with love.

³³Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵Pilate 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?" ³⁶Jesus 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." ³⁷Pilate 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."

As was mentioned last week, as we wind down the church year, we are at a different place in Jesus' ministry. Today, as we celebrate the end of the church year, we recall the Easter event, how Christ is the end of all things, the final word. The events of holy week are in full swing as we enter this eighteenth chapter of John. Judas has betrayed Jesus and he has been led off to the High Priest to be questioned about his disciples and his teachings. As Jesus is being interrogated, Peter meanwhile, is outside denying that he even knows this man. None of the other disciples are anywhere to be found. Jesus is then led from the High Priest's office to Pilate's headquarters, the secular authority. Pilate is leery about these funny dressed Jews who will not even enter the building to talk to him. He asks the leaders what has got them so upset about what this Jesus has done. Pilate, it soon becomes apparent, wants nothing to do with this mess. He even tells the Jewish leader to handle it on their own, take him back and kill him yourselves. But they remind him that, due to Roman law, they are forbidden to do just that and must have the proper authorities decide on the task. Pilate, realizing that his efforts are futile, says that he is willing to question Jesus himself. The questioning by Pilate is the Gospel text for this last Sunday of the church year, Christ the King Sunday. In verse 36, we hear Jesus's response to Pilate: "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 him, 'You say that I am a king...'"

What strange behavior for this one called a king. When you begin to examine this situation more closely, one discovers a glaring irony. Here in this court, is Pilate the earthly ruler presenting judgment over Jesus. The

irony becomes that an earthly ruler is acting in jurisdiction over the eternal ruler. Pilate the mortal, in the text, is placed above Jesus the immortal. God always chooses the unusual places and events to reveal God's reign.

Jesus has come to bear witness to the ultimate truth. Not the truth of some earthly ruler like Pilate, but this truth takes a radical form of a cross, of suffering, and of death. The one who sits on the kingly throne is the Lamb who was slain.

We, the people of God, who have gathered for worship this day, are the living witness and community which has been baptized into this king's death and resurrection. In the middle of our creeds, that we often say each week, is the phrase: "he was crucified under Pontius Pilate." Jesus' kingship submitted to worldly authority. The still deeper mystery is that Christ has been given dominion over all things, and that we, in our worship and our discipleship of God and neighbor, have been given a place in that kingdom, in that Reign of God, which is and is to come.

The kingship of Christ is not a super-political reign, though the church can never ignore political injustice or inhumanity in the social order of this world. In today's text, we hear once again God's last and ultimate word, that the Holy One is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. Maybe this is the message that we can work on bringing again and again to each other.

Where does our own earthly authority come from? We are told that it is a gift from God. Our human struggle, however, it to remember that and let that truth influence our earthly actions. We run into trouble, earthly rulers run into trouble, those in positions of authority run into trouble, when we begin to think that we are a power on to ourselves.

There is an old Chinese fable about a fox who was captured by a tiger. The fox pleaded with the tiger and said, "You can't eat me because the gods have made me the leader of all animals." The tiger responded with disbelief that this small fox was the leader of all animals and reported his doubt. The fox responded by asking the tiger to give him a chance to prove his statement. He told the tiger, "Follow me, for just one day, and see if any one animal, anywhere, challenges my position of supreme leader." The tiger agreed, and for one day, walked directly behind the fox through the woods. Every animal they encountered fled in panic. The tiger was amazed and agreed the fox must be a leader and let him go. It is easy to seem like a leader when we have a tiger walking behind us. However, when we forget the tiger behind us, when we forget God's authority and presence in our lives, we are bound to go astray, we are bound for corruption and ego trips. Pretty soon we see the world making way for just us, and not is what behind us.

Where do you see authority in your life? How do you let authority have dominion over you or have influence on your life? It starts the day we are born.

A boy was outside playing in his backyard and got a splinter in his foot. He came in and held up his foot. He was crying and saying, "I have splinter in my foot." His father said, "Sit on the couch and let's take a look at it." So the father sat the kid down to examine the injured foot. When he held up the child's foot and reached over to pull out the splinter, the boy said what many kids say: "Don't touch it." The father responded, "What do you want me to do? Take a picture of it? I've got to touch it. I can't levitate splinters out of your foot. There is no choice." The boy answered back, "but it will hurt." The father said, "I know it will hurt, but it won't hurt long,

and it will feel better with the splinter out." But that was not an adequate speech for the son. So finally, the mother entered the room and held the boy still while the father attempted to extract the splinter. The boy was kicking and screaming making the task even more difficult for the father. The father began to think to himself: "Why doesn't my son trust me? I am not attempting to cut off his foot or anything. I'm not here to hurt, I am here to help. Without this, the foot will only get worse. All he has to do is trust me."

Where do we see God's authority in our lives? In many ways, we are the boy in the story. We sometimes recognize and recall that God is indeed the one in authority, and we remember that Christ does have dominion over all things, and so in times of crisis and need, like the boy ran to his father for help, recognizing his father's authority, we too run to God. We run to the Alpha and Omega. However, also like the boy, we in some ways want to stop there. We want the authority to be present in our lives but not to touch it. How do we permit the King of kings to touch our lives? Do we yell out: "God, I am hurting, but don't touch me?" Are we like the child who kicks and screams and makes that task harder, when God enters more fully into our lives. We can say that we trust in God. We can say that God has the ultimate authority in our life and in this world. The leap of faith, however, comes when we have to let that authority touch us in a way in which we don't anticipate or even want at the time. And for many of us, at different times in our lives, that means we have to let God touch us. We have to, though scared to death, let the King of kings hold our foot and pull out the splinters. Jesus has become the king, through his life, death, and resurrection, his kingship and dominion is extended to all the world. Our

gift from God is that we can be a part of the joyous reign that will have no end. Amen.