

Sermon: Opting for Something Larger**Scripture: John 18:33-38****Preacher” Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 22, 2009**

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. Next week marks the beginning of Advent, believe it or not, and the official beginning of the church year. Each year the last Sunday on the church calendar is referred to as Christ the King Sunday or the reign of Christ and so we always have this awkward scripture right before the holiday season and advent around the crucifixion of Jesus. It's interesting that this has come to be known as Christ the King Sunday when Jesus never actually answers Pilate in the affirmative. Pilate asks him if he considers himself the King of the Jews – a trick question obviously because if he answers “yes” then he immediately gives Pilate a reason to kill him because Caesar is the King of the Jews and in fact the known world and more than a King Caesar is the Morning Sun, a god in his own right. So Jesus doesn't answer Pilate but actually says “you say that I am a King, I only say that I belong to the truth and its for the truth that I was born and the truth is my purpose...” and Pilate responds in the only way left for someone whose belief in ultimate presence and power stops with the human being, he says “eh, what is truth, anyway?” For Pilate truth and power are intertwined, since he has the power of life and death at his finger tips, in his mind he decides what truth is and what truth is not. And yet he is unnerved to see this humble carpenter's son standing before him not in fear and trembling but in quiet confidence aligned with some higher truth that escapes Pilate.

It's a powerful scene to just hold in our imaginations: the simple carpenter's son, Jesus of Nazareth, standing before the great Roman Prefect of Judea, each standing in a place of authority but of different worlds. Pilate holds the power of this world; of nations and politics, laws and judgment; land and dominion over, rulers and subjects, while Jesus stands in authority over the world of the soul; of ultimate meaning and purpose, of love and unity, of God and eternity. The mistake that we can make is to equate the two, is to believe that this world is all there is, to believe that there is nothing more that we are living within and living toward than this mere wisp of a life.

The thing that Jesus understands that is lost on Pilate is that there is a much larger movement or drama going on at the level of soul than can be seen or understood in the

various machinations of the day to day or even generation to generation. It's what the Hebrew people had been holding out for all along: that human life here has a larger purpose and meaning, that it's not an end in itself, nor is it an endless cyclical process of repeating existence. Instead the revelation of the Jews is that it all started someplace and its all going somewhere and in between is history, all of which – the beginning, middle and end - is all held within the loving hands of God. And it was this tradition and this truth that Jesus was standing within as he stood before Pilate.

To suggest that Jesus was a great moral teacher then is only half of the story because simply a moral world was not the world was not what Jesus was willing to die for. Moral living was obviously important to Jesus, no doubt, but it was also the effort to create a moral world that had led to much of the abuses of religion that Jesus was challenging throughout his earthly ministry. The reason Jesus could say that this leper or that adulterer or that prostitute or this tax collector was of value and worth despite the cultural definitions that said otherwise was because Jesus' reference point lay beyond this world to another world that he referred to as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. And apparently in that Kingdom much of what this world defines as worthless, holds great value, and much of what this world believes is of great worth is actually quite worthless. Even life and death itself is understood differently in this world compared with the world of the soul. Jesus is unwillingness to defend himself before Pilate even for the sake of his life, suggesting that there is some Truth, some Reality, some Depth of Meaning that trumps saving his skin. And Pilate is baffled by such a notion. "What is truth, anyway?" He scoffs. "It's all relative and you are willing to die for it?!"

I think it's worth noting here that the central thing that separates Jesus from a lot of other religious crazies who are willing to die for what they believe is that he is willing to die for what he believes BUT clearly he is not willing to kill for what he believes. That's an important distinction to make, I think, in our 21st century world where there are also militant Muslim terrorist and militant Christian pro-lifers are also willing to die but also kill others for what they believe. And that is what in my mind places such people outside of the Truth that Jesus was standing in before Pilate. And in fact he makes this distinction explicit later in the same passage when he says: "My kingdom if not of this world. If it were my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over, but as it is my kingdom is not from here."

And so Jesus is willing to die for the bigger picture of the soul of the world, which he always has his eye on. No one else around him can quite grasp that level of reality, which is why they are all always so confused by what he says and does, but Jesus not only keeps his eye focused there but his actions are solely aligned to that soul and God's loving purpose of healing and making whole again the soul of this world. Needless to say, it's a much bigger project than the project of his own life or his own people or his own culture or even his own time and generation. Jesus had his eye to a project that we now know would reach at least 2000 years into the future and continue unfolding even to this day, for a project of the soul is a project set in eternity not in this time-constrained world.

And so one of the things we are invited to do in our faith tradition is to subject our lives to the mystery of this great project of the soul that God, you might say, is working on. And we can talk about what this project looks like and what is expected of us within it and how it is unfolding, but ultimately we have got to acknowledge that it is and always will be largely shrouded in mystery. And yet it's a mystery that we are intimately involved in and that we can either make our lives vulnerable and open to or we can resist and deny.

Consider with me just for a moment. What if all that is going on in your life, the ups and downs, the trials and tribulations, the struggles to know what is the best decision to make and where the place is that you belong and what is true and authentic for you, ... what if all of that is NOT merely the tedious machinations of a day to day with no larger purpose and when it ends it'll simply all be over. Instead what if Jesus and the gospels are right and there is a much larger drama going on with regards to the soul of this world, and your own soul, where it's been and where it is going, as it is held by God in the kingdom of heaven? What would it feel like if we operated under the assumption that a God of love is right now working with and through our lives – in all its details and idiosyncrasies, all its joys and struggles and quirks – for the healing of the soul of the world. What if our decisions about whether to do this or that thing, to respond in this way or that way, are decisions that touch the very soul of the world? What if God, the Angels, the Spirit, however you best conceive of the Divine, is needing even the most mundane of our choices and experiences to be contributing to the well-being of the soul of this world? What if God is needing us to remember that we are playing on a much

deeper field than what we can experience with our 5 senses? Would it impact how we thought and what we did this week? Would it impact how we stood before our own Pilate, our internal or external judge and accuser whoever that might be? Who is saying, “I have the power to determine whether you live or die, whether you are happy or sad, whether you are lost or found” and how do we stand before the accuser and say “actually, my commitment, my accountability is to something, Some One, much greater than you and it is to the greater reality that my ultimate allegiance lies?”

This is what Jesus was saying to Pilate and unnerving Pilate with – you mean I don’t have the power over you to determine what you do and don’t do, how you feel and don’t feel, you mean I can’t determine for you what is the truth and power before which you must bow?” And let me tell you folks, whether we are conscious of it or not, we are constantly being told what is the truth and power before which we must bow be that religious or psychological or political or economical. So it seems our work is to do everything we can to make sure that our knees bow to what is eternal and of God rather than temporal and of this world. We are created to bow and to worship before something greater than ourselves. It is utterly natural to us. The only question is will the something greater be a nation or an economic system or another person or group of people or will it be towards the Eternal One, the God and Creator of our very lives who holds not only us but the soul of this world within His/Her loving embrace.

This week we are left with this vision of Jesus standing before Pilate – king before king – king of this world before the King of the Soul – Jesus is faced with the choice of embracing his own life as the highest end and purpose or forsaking his life for a higher life, purpose, and truth. Next week we begin our walk towards Christmas when we hold our collective breath for 4 weeks as God perches on the edge of history with the choice of entering into the human drama or not and then we will celebrate with great joy the birth of a baby boy through whom the world’s process is drawn into God’s own becoming. ... And in everything we give the King of Kings all the thanks....