

**Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church
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November 22, 2009

Christ the King

John 18:33-37

³³Then Pilate 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."

"King? I Don't Think So!"

The scene puts us back in Holy Week. It is Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ day, but the text calls us back to Holy Week. It is in that week, at the conclusion of the Maundy Thursday service that we sing the response to the Psalm. It is the last thing we sing or say as a congregation before we gather after the crucifixion on Good Friday.

**The response is: *"The sacrifice you accept, O God, is a humble spirit."*
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Oh, yes, this is John's Gospel. It is true in the all of the gospels that there is more at play than meets a plain reading of the text, but it is even more so in the Gospel of John. This is the gospel that I always read on two planes. I think of those planes as one being horizontal and the other being vertical.

On the first plane, the horizontal plane, is the human level of things. This is what is presented by the text. It is what we hear and see and observe if we look at the text on the level of what is happening in a practical, ordinary, human level of understanding. It is what is readily available as one reads the text.

On the other plane, the vertical plane, is the spiritual dimension of things. This is what is happening as we see with a different set of eyes. It is what is happening as we look more cosmically at the text and try to discern what God is up to here. It takes some deeper reflection and some questioning to look on this level. But it is on this level that we begin to see what is really real and to truly hear the good news that is the gospel.

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On this level (the horizontal plane) it is clear what is happening here. Jesus is on trial. His life hangs in the balance. It has all come to this. He can be found guilty or he can be let go. This is a significant moment in his life and the whole of the story has been building to this.

Pilate, as the political authority, has the power to condemn Jesus to death. This is clearly what the institutional leadership of the church wants. Jesus has been for them a throne in the flesh. It is far easier to do away with him than to wrangle with him any longer. Their desire is that he be done in. They, however, do not have the power to take such an action. That, under Roman occupation, is reserved for the territorial governors. In this case, Pilate.

Jesus is before Pilate. There is an exchange that happens between the two of them. Pilate is both judge and prosecutor. Pilate has all the power here. Jesus is being interrogated. The crowds have already shouted, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate is the decider. Jesus is on trial.

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But on this level (the vertical plane) such is not so clear. Who has the power here? And even who is on trial? Jesus makes it clear to Pilate, and any others that are listening, that he (as in Pilate) only has the power that he has been accorded to him from above. It is, on this other level, which we can read this whole narrative as Pilate being the real one who is on trial.

There is a way of reading this text that makes it clear that Jesus is really the one taking the lead here. He is the one with the initiative, and his initiative is inviting to Pilate. One can think back to those scenes earlier in the gospel such as Jesus with the woman at the well. There, with someone the culture would insist Jesus has no interest in, he invites her to a different life that has meaning and flows with living water. It is as if all her living was meant for that moment when Jesus truly gives her life.

That is the case with Pilate. There is a real way in which everything has come to this moment. And the movement of Jesus is to invite Pilate into a view of life and the world that is wholly other than that from which Pilate has lived. The one whose life is in question is Pilate, not Jesus.

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Today is Christ the King Sunday. On this level (the horizontal plane), we have been building to this moment all year long. This is the final Sunday on the liturgical calendar. It begins with the season of waiting, Advent, and traces the life of Christ and the birth of the church. The year ends with Christ the King as a final summation of all that is. We proclaim Christ as Lord of Lords and King of Kings in true Handel's Messiah fashion.

It is good. Christ as King. The Reign of Christ. It is true that both of those concepts position Christ as the head of all that is and the clear "in charge" sovereign who rules and reigns from on high. It is a beautiful thing indeed. And so both spiritually and physically we confess that we have no other who is head of all but Christ and Christ alone. On the hierarchy he is at the very top.

That is one view. But there is this other level. (The vertical plane.) There is this other view that has to acknowledge that we humans are the ones who look to and long for positions of power. We are the ones who become enamored with the idea of kingship and fame and fortune and power.

Such is not the Christ. Instead, we see in him a completely different view. In him there is this supreme sacrifice of himself for the other. It is here in John's Gospel that Jesus makes it so lucid, so clear, so apparent that it is about serving that matters. He is the suffering servant.

Here in John it is the Word made flesh that takes a towel and basin of water and washes the disciples' feet. He does that and he tells them, "I have given you an example of what you should do."

It is not about power and authority. It is about serving. It is about making a difference in another's life. It is about bringing new life and new possibility out of someone else's pain and struggle.

These views of the Christ leave me with the question of king? I don't think so. Its not the most significant title or position. It is Jesus as servant wearing that towel and bearing that basin of washing water that calls us into a way life of joyful service that transforms the world.

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Today we are asking that you complete a Commitment of Giving Card—a pledge card. On this level (the horizontal plane) that is about being able to budget. On this level it is about budgets and bills and the dollars and cents it costs to be the church.

It has to do with the reality that we have a gas and electric bill every month. It also has to do with the fact that we, you and I together—all of us working in concert—seek to make a difference in this world. And so we contribute to the mission work of the larger church.

We have to crunch the numbers. All of us do that in our homes too. And because of that your Session is bold enough to ask you to make a commitment and to write it down. Your Session is bold enough to tell you the truth that it costs more. Its costs more to be the church every year.

This is a time when many churches are closing. This is a time when many others are using their endowments and bequests. We do not have that luxury. We count on all of us doing our best and sacrificially giving.

There is another level operative here too (the vertical level). We limit the truth if we think it is all about whether the bills are paid or not

paid. We limit the truth if we think that what we give doesn't really matter all that much.

The pattern we see in Christ is one of giving. It is one of the servant life. It is a pattern of sacrifice. We are called into that way. We are called to give and serve and sacrifice. It is more than paying the bills. It is about the way in which we make a difference in people's lives—and so we are working at getting clearer about our purpose for being here—to change lives and grow in God's love!

The reality is we are gifted with everything. Our homes, our jobs, our money, our relationships—all of it is gift. And as a way of acknowledging that—the pattern of God's people has always been a tithe. 10% of what we have that we give back to God. For those of us who are not quite there with the 10% we need to strive for it. I remember how a member of this church used to say about the tithe that "it isn't that we cannot afford to tithe—the issue is that we cannot afford not to."

What we give, what we donate is not just a figure. It is the difference. It is what makes a difference in the lives of people. In our giving children are provided with Sunday School lessons, hungry ones are helped in more countries than I can recount, and we stand as a harbor of welcome and love for people in this community who have no other. Our giving is one of the ways we take the towel and basin and wash the world here.

It is spiritual.

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One this level (the horizontal one) it probably seems odd. A sip of juice or wine and a bite of bread. Hardly a meal. How would it matter if you have it or don't have it? Seemingly it just would not.

But we know here—at the Lord's table—that there is more here than a taste of juice or crumb of bread. We eat and drink on another level (the vertical level). We eat and drink as a way of remembering that Christ who reigns on high as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is the very one who took on the cross. "He emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave." He took on the form of a servant. And served us.

We come to this table knowing that here we taste and see what is to come—that there is coming a time and a place where all is made new and where we feast at table with those though all the ages.

We do this as a community—we commune. We commune with the Holy Spirit of the very God who formed us and set us apart. We commune with each other. Above all else, and even if there is nothing else, this is what holds us together. This is what calls us together. Our communing in Jesus Christ.

Our being in him—joining him in serving the world in need—our communing in that is the very way in which it is possible to see him and know him. As we open ourselves to each other and we come meet the truth in broken bread and poured out cup. We meet the truth—the very one who stood before Pilate and is present here.

He is present here (on the vertical plane) and he is present here (on the horizontal plane)—he is present in all of it. And he is present in us we don the towel and basin to wash the world in love. Amen.