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John 18:33-37

POLITICAL SUBVERSION

The face-off between Jesus and Pilate was an unusual one. Jesus is supposedly the powerless victim, standing bound before the Roman governor Pilate. It would seem that Pilate, with his power and position would hold all the cards. And yet, throughout the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, Pilate is the one who comes across as flustered and unsure of himself, while Jesus appears centered and in control. Even though Pilate is Caesar's representative, even though Pilate resides in an enormous palace, even though Pilate commands the military and has the power over life and death, the writer of John's gospel repeatedly depicts Pilate as weak and indecisive.

First, Pilate gets boxed in by the religious leaders. They bring Jesus to Pilate for his judgment and sentencing, but the religious leaders won't even go into Pilate's headquarters because they don't want to be defiled by entering a Gentile home. So Pilate is forced to go outside to meet with the religious leaders. Just a bit humiliating for a Roman governor who is supposed to be so powerful.

Then, when Pilate later wants to release Jesus because he can't find anything really wrong about him, the religious leaders coerce him into condemning Jesus to death by telling him, "this guy Jesus calls himself a king and anyone claiming to be a king is a rival to the emperor." Pilate finds himself boxed in and we are given a picture of someone who doesn't really know how to manage his power or act decisively.

I believe the writer of John's gospel is deliberately giving us such an image of Pilate because it sets up a clear contrast between the two kings and kingdoms that are in conflict here in

this passage. On one hand we have Pilate, representing the powers and kingdom's of this world that *think* they are in control, that believe they are strong, that like to feel the weight of their own importance, but which are really beneath it all, illegitimate and impotent when it comes to what really matters. And then on the other hand, we are given Jesus, who despite the handcuffs, is the legitimate king and the one in control. It is this shackled king who will soon be executed who subverts the very kingdoms that Pilate represents.

Pilate can only understand one kind of kingdom--the kind that uses power to coerce, to force, to intimidate, to achieve personal wealth. And thus, this is the issue at the forefront of his mind when he questions Jesus. He wants to know if Jesus is a threat to the Roman authority. And so he asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus responds by basically asking Pilate, "whose asking this question? Is it you or is it the Jewish people?" The answer depends on who's doing the asking. Because if the question came from Pilate, if the question was, "Are you a king who is planning to overthrow Roman rule," well then, Jesus' answer would be no. But if the question was, "Are you the messianic king of Israel?" well then Jesus' answer would be yes. So Jesus wants to know, "who's asking the question?"

Pilate gets flustered by Jesus' response. He blurts back, "I'm not a Jew, am I? What have you done wrong?" And then Jesus answers, "Ok, if you want to know about me, I'll tell you. Call me a king if you like. But my kingdom is not from this world. It's a very different kind of kingdom than you are familiar with."

A different kind of kingdom. A kingdom not of this world. Some people have misunderstood Jesus' words to mean that his kingdom was merely a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom that was not concerned with earthly matters or affairs. But that is not what Jesus meant. Jesus was clearly very concerned with affairs of this world: with hungry people, with

oppressed peoples, with forgiving and transforming people. These actions were by nature political acts because when you include an outcast, when you transform someone, when you bring hope to the hopeless, you are upsetting the status quo and the organization of society. So, the kingdom Jesus preached about and taught about was indeed very concerned with earthly affairs.

However, when Jesus said his kingdom was not from this world, he was speaking about the origins of his kingdom. His authority to rule and to reign did not come from this world. Jesus' kingdom and its authority came from God. And not only did the origins of Jesus' kingdom not depend upon earthly authority but it would employ vastly different tactics than earthly kingdoms. In fact, Jesus tells Pilate just that when he says, "if my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to save me from you. But my kingdom is not from here." Jesus' kingdom employs different tactics than the powers of this world that will kill, and fight, and coerce. God will not win over the world by the same methods human kingdoms use.

How, then, does Jesus' kingdom operate? Love. Love is the tactic used by Jesus to win us over. Love is the power used by Jesus to heal and to transform. Love is Jesus' secret weapon. Love is how Jesus subverts the kingdoms and powers and authorities that rule our lives and infest our hearts with selfishness, lies, hatred, fear, and anger. Love is the tactic that will win.

Jesus understands this and that is why he can remain so centered and in control all the while Pilate is nervous as a cat, worried about what he should do next, anxious about losing face or upsetting Caesar or appeasing the crowds. Pilate is anxious about threats to his power. And so he should be. Pilate may send Jesus off to his death, but Jesus knows whose kingdom will win. Jesus knows the power that resides in love. Jesus knows that Pilate and Caesar and their kind down through the centuries will ultimately lose.

The writer of the book of Revelation reminds us that earthly kings and leaders will come and go, but the true king, the true ruler of the world is Jesus. Jesus is referred to as the Alpha and the Omega: the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet--meaning that Jesus is the beginning of all things and the ending of all things. His power and his reign will outlast all earthly powers and authorities. And in that, in that we can find hope. We can find hope in the supremacy of Jesus' kingdom: a kingdom rooted in love, compassion, justice, forgiveness, peace, and truth. Not only is Jesus' kingdom more powerful than earthly kingdoms and rulers, in fact, Jesus' kingdom subverts the earthly leaders and powers that deal in lies, and injustice, and greed, and hate--be those leaders of nations or of churches or of corporations. The unjust and selfish leaders of the world like Pilate *should* indeed be nervous because God's truth is marching on.

And as Christians, we join the march. As Christians, we are called to participate in God's kingdom. As Jesus repeatedly reminded us, God's kingdom is near at hand. It is taking place right now, and Jesus calls his followers to join in living out kingdom principles. That means that you and I are called to subversive activity. Each Sunday that we gather here in church, we are engaged in political subversion. Here we celebrate values and a way of life that undermines the powers of hate, and the powers of greed, and the powers of selfishness, and the powers of deception and lies. We stand with the King of Love and so our lives are dedicated to a radically different kind of authority than what much of the world follows. And so when we pray the Lord's Prayer each Sunday, we are really making a politically subversive statement as we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." When praying for God's kingdom to come, we are praying for a dramatic overthrow of all earthly powers and authorities--including the ones that rule our hearts and minds and souls and hold us captive. God's kingdom is the one we pray for. God's kingdom is the one we seek to live out when we walk out these

doors, and when we vote, and when we decide how to spend our money, and when we reach out to help our neighbor, and when we work through a conflict and offer forgiveness, and when we welcome and help the alien and stranger in our midst. Thy kingdom come, we pray. If we seek to follow Jesus faithfully, if we follow the King of Love, we too will be engaged in subversive activity.

Pilate was right to be nervous. There can only be one ruling king. Today we celebrate that Jesus sits on the throne of this world, and that Jesus sits on the throne of our hearts. It is this King we will follow with our lives. But as Revelation reminds us, the one who wears the crown is not the lion but the lamb. The lamb of love is our king.