

Christ the King Sunday; John 18:33-37
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This morning, on the last Sunday before the season of Advent, on the Sunday known as “Christ the King” Sunday – through our Gospel passage we are sent back to Good Friday, to the Passion, to the final days before Jesus’ crucifixion and death. We are sent to a tightly confined scene – an intensely consequential conversation between Pontius Pilate and Jesus. The moment is often referred to as “the trial before Pilate.” But really, it might more aptly be called “Pilate on trial.”

Pilate is conflicted. He knows that Jesus should not be on trial, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” he asks his cohorts. Pilate is the Roman Empire’s man – charged with the control, submission, and rule of the Judean people. And, quite frankly, he doesn’t consider this spindly 33-year-old peasant from the hinterlands much of a threat to that rule. But there’s something strange going on here. If Pilate finds in Jesus no threat, no case against him, then why does he have Jesus flogged and why does he, eventually, hand him over to be crucified?

It’s curious. Pilate likely considers himself the most powerful, most in-control person in Jerusalem. Pilate, and Pilate alone, is the local representative of the greatest world power of that time. He has riches, visibility, position, command, and armies. He has power, and brags about it, “Do you not know,” he lords over Jesus, “that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” But for all of this control, all of this position, riches, armies, and power – Pilate is terrified. He finds himself in a trap. The leaders want Jesus crucified. If Pilate doesn’t give them what they want, he can’t see a way to stay in control. And he knows it won’t play well back in Rome if, on his watch, he can’t handle matters in Jerusalem. But

So when Pilate summons Jesus and asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” one has to wonder: is that *really* his question? He doesn’t truly believe Jesus to be an insurrectionist – and the title “king” is loaded with political meaning for the Romans who have no tolerance for any king but Caesar. It’s a sarcastic question meant to demean and ensnare. Pilate is trying here to catch Jesus in a technicality so he can placate the leaders and get out of his own bind. If he can trick Jesus into confessing, then his problems are solved, even though, deep down, he knows Jesus isn’t guilty. Pilate’s real goal – staying on top, staying in the illusion of control – trumps everything. Trapped, Pilate has to hide his true convictions, his honest questions, and his haunting fears. Trapped, Pilate denies his authentic self. Trapped, Pilate constricts his life and fades from view, remembered only for this one, catastrophic choice, made in weakness and fear.

If we learn anything from Pontius Pilate it’s this: fear is a trap. Like Pilate’s fear, ours catches us in a place between our authentic selves (that God-created self which makes us free and hopeful and open and alive) and our protective shields (erected when we are losing control, or failing, or looking stupid or incompetent or somehow wanting, or protecting ourselves from other people’s uncharitable judgement). Make no mistake - there is a lot to fear. We are living in a time of pandemic, global warming, gun violence, racism, skyrocketing and intensifying mental illness. We live in a fearful and chaotic world.

And part of our intricate creation is a built-in “fight or flight” reflex – the part of the human brain that allowed the human race to survive when it was being chased by dinosaurs and hungry beasts.

There is a place and a circumstance for a healthy fear – one that gets our adrenaline pumping and offers the boost of energy we need to get through a threatening moment. I’ve been participating in triathlons and 5K races for the past four years – and no matter how docile or familiar the event, I always feel a bit of fear before the starting gun. The adrenaline collecting in my system gives me the gas I need for a strong and steady start. Similarly with preaching. I’ve been a regular inhabitant of a pulpit now for almost 25 years – and there has yet to be a Sunday when, while driving to church about to preach, I don’t feel jittery and apprehensive about that day’s offering. For years I berated myself – why is it that after a decade, after 15 years, after 20 years that I’m still afraid? Still nervous? Still so shaky and unsure? But I have come to the understanding that while the response comes from a bit lower on my brainstem, part of an ancient survival response, the fear is also an indication that what about to do is important, offering the best of what I have in any given week to the glory of God and out of love for all of you. Sometimes my best is not very good or inspiring. And I worry that it’s not cohesive enough, meaningful enough, illustrative or complex enough. I guess I’m afraid of not being enough. I worry about what all you will think and how you will judge me. And I impulsively flee to that place of protection – trying to hide behind barriers of fancy words, literary examples, and systematic theology. But sometimes a preaching ministry can feel relevant and needed and connective. And when it feels relevant and needed and connective, it’s always because it’s vulnerable and honest, and coming out of an authentic self. What is most meaningful – in any ministry, in any relationship, in any interaction -- is authenticity, our ability to offer a glimpse of what Thomas Merton called the “immortal diamond” that lives down deep inside each one of us. That place where our true selves and the living God meet.

We live in a fearful time. And, at the same time, fear is a trap. This is not a new paradox. In seminary I studied Koine Greek – the language in which the New Testament is written. One of the things I learned over three years of study, in addition to how to parse a million verbs, is that other than the topic of money, Jesus spoke most about fear. “Me phobou,” Jesus said, over and over and over. “Do not be afraid.” My Greek professor tested us constantly and before any quiz or exam you could hear a ripple around the room. “Me phobou!” we’d say to each other.

It seems to me that what is being called for is paying attention enough, being mindful enough, praying enough that we do not allow ourselves to default into the trap of fear. What is being called for is deeper consciousness – one that recognizes our authenticity as our real power and ultimate worth. It’s what connects us most profoundly to God. It’s what offers us meaning, depth, purpose, and happiness. Our authenticity is more powerful than our fear about what people think of us, stronger than failure, more resilient than loss.

Writing this week for Richard Rohr’s Center for Contemplative Action blog, therapist James Finley suggests claiming our authenticity is a healing of sorts. “We can say that the deepest question of my life,” Finley writes, “is not what my father . . . or my mother thought of me, or what my husband or wife thinks of me, or what my pastor or my boss thinks of me. Really, the deepest issue isn’t what I think of me, but *can I join God in knowing who God knows me to be?* Can I join God in seeing who God sees me to be when God sees me? This is salvation. In order to do this, I have to let go of my own present way of seeing things, and I discover I can’t. We’re afraid to lose the control that we think that we have over the life that we think that we’re living, and we’re addicted to what blinds us. . . . The mystery of the cross,

then, is this mystery of just being liberated from this deep addiction to the illusion of an ultimately isolated self that has to make it on its own. To realize I'm in the presence of the love that loves us and takes us to itself. . . ."

Finley's idea is lived into by Jesus in this morning's Gospel. As Pilate asks the question designed to catch Jesus in a capital offence, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers back, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" There, before Pilate, as his life hangs in the balance, Jesus is alive and awake. Jesus takes that moment to look for the real Pilate, the authentic Pilate, the one who in truth is completely trapped in his desperate effort to stay in control, paralyzed with his fear of loss and embarrassment. Even in that fraught, terrifying moment, in front of all those people wanting him crucified, Jesus opens himself, gives his authentic self to be with the true person who is Pilate. Jesus invites Pilate to reveal himself, to be transparent, to share how it is with him, to utter the truth of his own life. This reaching out to the authentic self of another is how Jesus begins his ministry with the Samaritan woman at the well, and how he ends his earthly ministry, reaching out to the criminals hanging beside him, hanging on the cross. Jesus sees everyone around him as God sees them. And that is so inherent in his ministry, in the Good News of his life and who he himself is, that he is able to make that invitation even in the midst of an encounter that will lead to his death. "Everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice," he tells Pilate. Even to his torturer, Jesus offers to be the good shepherd, the good shepherding king, who, when his sheep listen to his voice, are led into abundant life, and then more life.

On this Sunday the church proclaims Christ the King. Together we announce that we bow only to Jesus the Christ – the king who comes not to bind or control or frighten or dominate, but the king who comes to set us free. We bow to the king who invites us into more life, who gives us the strength to break the trap of fear and live not in default and impulsivity but more into authenticity. This is *always* Jesus' offer. The truth is that each of us are as God authentically sees us. "Everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice," Jesus says to Pilate. To receive Jesus the Christ's offer means accepting the truth about our authentic selves and living out of, and into, that truth. Tragically, Pilate refuses it. "What is truth?" he says dismissively.

In the end, the truth of our lives, here in suburban Minneapolis, is that we have food to eat, and homes in which to live, and no one here, to my knowledge, is being chased by a hungry T Rex. Isn't it about time we take Jesus' hand, and shed the trap of fear like a dead skin? Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the World: Year B, Volume 4, David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds)., pp.333-337.

"Do not be afraid," translation https://biblehub.com/greek/phobou_5399.htm

James Finley, "Seeing Ourselves as God Sees Us," Center for Contemplation and Action,

<https://cac.org/seeing-ourselves-as-god-sees-us-2021-11-18/>