

Reigning from the Cross

Luke 23:33-43

The Reign of Christ

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 24) 2019

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Our Gospel lesson for today is full of irony and paradox: the One who rules the universe is crucified between two thieves. The representative of the most powerful empire on earth mockingly puts a sign over Jesus of Nazareth's head on the cross saying: "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). In a world of violence, where power is understood as the ultimate value, we followers of the Crucified understand the Cross as the heart of our faith. Irony. Paradox.

No wonder the Apostle Paul says that the message of the cross is foolishness and a scandal (I Corinthians 1:18-25).

Each of the Gospels is centered on the cross of Christ, though each emphasizes a slightly different picture of Christ ruling from this cross. In Mark, Christ is Israel's true king, but his kingship is hidden in suffering and rejection. A centurion declares, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mk. 15:34, 39) but he dies on the cross under the mocking banner "King of the Jews."

In Matthew, Jesus is the God-authorized Son and Israel's Messiah who teaches with heavenly authority concerning the will of God (Mt. 5-7), and performs miracles that give authority to his teachings. Jesus as King in Matthew is, in the words that both open and close his gospel, "God with us" (1:23, 28:20).

In John, Jesus is the Word, God in the flesh who has come among us. He is the Truth that will set us free (John 8:32). He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life

(John 14:6). He is arrested and brought before the Political Powers in the person of the Roman governor, Pilate, who asks, “Are you a king?” Jesus answers, “I came into the world to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:34-38). Pilate then asked a question right out of today’s headlines, “What is truth?” Perhaps Pilate learned that question in Rome where there are only “alternative facts,” not truth, and where only power, politics, and violence matter. Pilate believes in the truth of power. But standing in front of him is Truth Incarnate: the power of truth.

In Luke, Jesus is the Son of a God who is a suffering servant, who loves enemies and forgives, seeks justice, and is a bringer of peace – all politically subversive notions. Here in Luke 23, Jesus is dragged to the Roman governor’s palace for three reasons, all political: “We found this fellow subverting the nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.”

I know, I know, we are uncomfortable with these political accusations against Jesus. We want him to stay spiritual. Spiritual is safe. Less contentious. But Jesus was accused and died as a politically subversive criminal; his followers were considered subversive citizens. Jesus was and is political – it is not and never has been Republican or Democrat politics but it is a politics that calls all of our politics before the cross in judgment.

Pilate met the angry mob outside the governor’s mansion, then grilled Jesus alone back inside. “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus replied. “My kingdom is another kind.”

“You are a king, then!” mocked Pilate.

“Yes, you are right in saying that I am a king.”

Pilate goes back outside, declares that Jesus is innocent, then has his soldiers beat, flog, and humiliate him with purple robes and a crown of thorns. “Hail, O king of the Jews!” they mock.

Back outside, the mob hounds Pilate: “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” Pilate thus found himself sandwiched between angering the mob and betraying his emperor.

He decided to go along: “Here is your king. Shall I crucify your king?”

“We have no king but Caesar!” they shout.

As white folks like me have learned from my sisters and brothers who are black, there are many ways to get lynched, many of them perfectly legal, with a trial and a jury and judge. It’s still lynching. And Jesus was lynched. Pilate might have known Jesus was innocent of the accusations of the lynching mob but he went along. The mob shouting for Jesus to be crucified is a lynch mob. And Pilate went along.

Maybe Pilate got to be governor because he knew how to just go along?
How many tortures and deaths on crosses did he order because he just went along?

How many shootings and lynchings? How many injustices do we watch and do nothing or say nothing before we become indifferent?

Theologian Miroslav Volf points out that for Frederick Nietzsche, Pilate is the sole New Testament figure who commands Nietzsche's respect because of Pilate's scorn of truth. Volf comments, "Nietzsche knew that by not taking truth seriously Pilate was deciding not to take this "Jewish affair" seriously. And Nietzsche shared Pilate's scorn for the 'little Jew' [Nietzsche's words] from Galilee: 'One more Jew more or less – what does it matter?'" (see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion or Embrace*, p. 263). To be concise, when we scorn truth we will scorn people. We don't care. We just go along.

Pilate insults the Jews one last time by fastening a notice to the cross, written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, knowing all the time this would offend them: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." They object, of course: "Don't write 'The king of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews."

Pilate says, "Too late! What I have written, I have written." And though he is mocking the Jews, Pilate wrote much more than he ever could have known or imagined.

Later believers would worship Jesus not only as king of the Jews, but also as "the king of kings" (1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 19:16), the "king of the ages" (Revelation 19:3), and "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Revelation 1:5).

From the four Gospels to the Apostle Paul and across 20 centuries, Christians from around the globe rightly understand this cross as the crux, the center of our faith. The irony and tragedy is that for many American evangelicals, the cross is the singular salvation event of salvation, but beyond giving us salvation the cross has little meaning. My criticism is that for American evangelicals, the rest of the Christian life is determined by other things, but not the cross. Christian teaching from 20 centuries sees the cross as not only as the singular event in determining our salvation but also the shape of the life we are to lead. Jesus said, “If anyone seeks to follow me they must deny themselves, take up the cross every single day, and follow” (Luke 9:23).

So what does it mean to take up the cross? And more, what does it mean that this One whom we consider Lord and Ruler, rules from the cross?

I John 4 tells us that “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (v.16). And it says, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (v. 8). Jesus on the cross shows us what love looks like. It is self-giving. It is always love for the other. Not self-absorbed but love that shares and embraces and receives.

The cross shows us a God who suffers with us. The cross shows us the King of Kings who is in solidarity with everyone who suffers (Moltmann). The cross is a great symbol of deep commitment and understanding of suffering. God knows our suffering. The cry of anguish of the cross in all its depth and complexity speaks to a God who names and understands the kind of suffering we endure. It is not an approving validation and legitimizing of suffering and the circumstances that create our suffering, like violence and abuse. It is a point of identification and

naming, a presence that says, “Your suffering is excruciating; I am with you and I understand you.”

Cindy Bertin’ friend, Beth Toler, says she remembers sitting with a woman in a family shelter with bruises on her face. She had finally left her abusive husband. “I am incredibly sad,” she said, “but now I have hope.” And Beth says she was holding a cross, a crucifix to be exact, and she looked at it and said, “I finally know what this means.”

For her, the cross named her reality, her suffering, in all its harshness and brutality. The cross said to her that God in Christ was with her and suffered alongside of her giving her hope and healing. It represented a turning point for her at her impasse between expectancy and despair.

This is also why the African-American church has so strongly identified with the crucifixion of Jesus, for the cross reveals where God is found and who God is. Not among the powerful but among those who are powerless and who have been lynched. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who learned from the African-American church in Harlem, said, “The Bible directs [us] to God’s powerlessness and suffering. Only a suffering God can help.”

One of the greatest teachers of the church was Irenaeus, who died in the year 202 and was a bishop or pastor in what is now known as Lyon, France. He was a young disciple of Polycarp who had been a disciple of John the Apostle. Irenaeus said that Christ on the cross shows us the embrace of God. Christ’s two arms stretched outward on the cross is God’s embrace of all who suffer (*Against Heresies*, 5, 6, I).

But that's not all. Here is part of the scandal of the cross: Christ also embraces the enemies of God. Irenaeus said that when God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. This is the atonement that sticks in our craw. As Paul said, "Those who were far off have been brought near in the cross" (Eph. 2). Both victims and perpetrators, neighbors and enemies, are embraced in the cross of Christ.

Now, as an aside, perhaps not everyone wants to be embraced by the cross. Some enemies of God have been so immersed in hatred and in violence for so long that the loving embrace of God is something they abhor. All I can say at his point, is this raises questions about the nature of hell. Is hell for those who hate God but find themselves eternally in God's presence? This is grist for the mill of theological reflection and for another day. For now, hear me that Christ on the cross shows us God who embraces in love, receiving the other, and being with all those who hurt and suffer.

The old teaching of the church is that we imitate that which we adore. In other words, we worship this One who is hanging on a cross, and we are called to imitate him. How?

Judy McDonald, charter member of this church, who is out of town today but gave me permission to mention this, told me thirty years ago, not long after I got here, that no matter what, this church was founded on the notion that we stand with open arms at the front door. And she is right. Our default position, our initial posture is to embrace. Prior to any other judgment, we embrace.

Now after embrace, we might very well have conversations about what it means to be a part of this community. Like Fannie Lou Hamer famously said that all were welcome at God's welcome table where there is enough for everyone. She said even Mississippi governor Ross Barnett and Senator James Eastland were welcome at God's table, though they might need to learn some manners once they are there.

Like Fannie Lou Hamer, our initial posture is welcome and embrace, and then inside community, around the welcome table, we learn good manners.

Furthermore, being a people of the cross reminds us that God is wherever there is suffering, wherever there is hurt, wherever there is injustice, wherever there is bigotry. That's where God is. And that is where we are to be. We are to pay attention to whoever the principalities and powers are nailing to the cross today and be with them while also shouting for it to stop. We are not going to put up with lynching no matter what form it takes. It might be in a courthouse or in a bank or payday lender. It might be with guns and violence or with drugs and poverty or with bigotry and hatred. It's still lynching. It is still crucifixion.

Rev. Peter Storey is one of the most remarkable and courageous Christians I've ever met. He was Methodist bishop of Capetown, South Africa back when apartheid was the law of that land, and he served as chaplain to Nelson Mandela, when Mandela was in prison for so many years. Rev. Storey tells of Khotso House (Khotso means peace), which was the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches in Johannesburg, who were fighting against racism and apartheid. A massive bomb exploded in the building destroying the front of it in the middle of the night, and the next day the employees and volunteers, both black and white

gathered in a circle in the midst of the rubble to pray and read scripture. They, in turn, were surrounded by white police, not as an act of protection, but as an act of intimidation. The message was clear: You conform to apartheid or else you will be destroyed.

Rev. Storey said that while the apartheid police surrounded them, there was another message that defined who the church was called to be and what the church was to do. There in the foyer of the destroyed building was a great banner still standing for all to see. It was a banner of Jesus Christ with outstretched arms offering his gift of peace to the entire world; Christ's arms were open, embracing all people. Rev. Storey said it became overwhelmingly evident that evil was only the second strongest force in the world, and that everyone could see there was another message and another force that was greater than evil: the way of the cross (*Sermons from Duke Chapel*, p. 280-281).

That's our calling.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.