

November 21, 2021

John 18:33-38a

Reign of Christ Sunday

Pastor Ann Hultquist

I don't know about you, but I wonder if legalizing sports betting in Colorado was such a great idea...I'm not all that excited about gambling in general, but it's really because of all of the commercials that we now have to endure. FanDuel, Bet MGM, Sports Illustrated, Bet Rivers—all so alluring, guaranteeing us a great return on a miniscule investment (read the fine print!)—your team wins, you win—big. It works--total bets *every month* in our state exceed \$1million.

Far and away the most obnoxious commercials belong to Caesar's Sportsbook—the modern but still old school Caesar promising fun, fun, more fun and more money to his adoring public. Download the app to your phone and you'll see a gold chalice just waiting to 'help' you divest yourself of some money...

The real Caesar during Jesus' adult life was anything but fun, at least in what we know of him. You won't find his name in the Gospel this morning from John, but believe me, he lurks in the background. Tiberius Caesar was a reluctant emperor, brooding, obstructive—not as revengeful as those who came before or after him, but definitely knew how to play politics. The nation of Israel had been a thorn in the Roman side for so long—skirmishes between religious groups that had to be controlled; insurrectionists rising up over and over; rebels challenging the heavy taxes that kept the people in poverty—they finally appointed Roman governors whose job it was to keep a lid on these foreigners.

Pontius Pilate got the short straw. Sort of like expecting to be appointed the Ambassador to France and ending up in Greenland. Israel was considered a backwater assignment, thousands of miles from Rome. Pilate had to form alliances with the religious leaders, tamp down any hint of rebellion, and make sure that Caesar heard nothing but good reports.

When Jesus is dragged before him at his palace, Pilate is stymied. Yet another rabbi, gathering followers—what could be so dangerous or dramatic about that?

But somewhere Pilate hears a worrisome allegation: this man thinks he's a king. Can you imagine the alarm bells that went off in his head? There could only be *one ruler* in the Roman Empire.

On this final Sunday of the church year, with Advent just around the corner, we pause for a moment. For the past year, we have followed Jesus from Bethlehem to Galilee to the cross and empty tomb. Sunday after Sunday we heard scripture passages that have led us on this journey. The pause this morning dares to say that everything we have heard and learned about Jesus since December 2020 culminates in this day: Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday.

Hearing that, you might feel stymied as well: our minds are on Thanksgiving and most of us have zero experience with monarchs or a monarchy. Jesus as Savior, sure. Jesus Risen, right. Jesus as a baby, check. But Jesus as king? It might not be an image that speaks to our minds or hearts. We might find ourselves asking, right along with Pilate "So you are a king?"

Maybe that's because of all the qualities and accoutrements that we associate with rulers, or maybe better for our understanding, people who have positions of authority: they have power, money, influence, privilege, accolades, and they often envision themselves as so much "better" than the average person. You don't have to look far to see all of those things on display in our own country and around the world just this week.

And in our country and in our world, power so often equals violence, or the ability to threaten violence toward others. The shootings in Aurora remind us that there is a system which many people buy into, which says respect comes only if you are holding a gun.

Jesus takes all these assumptions and turns them inside out and upside down, doesn't he? The only power Jesus exudes is God's grace; there are no boundaries to separate or categorize people into worthy or unworthy; kneeling with a towel and basin as a humble servant; refusing to use any kind of violence; on the cross embracing this messy world and its messed-up people with love that refuses to be silenced, cannot be silenced, even by death. The truth that Pilate is looking for, that he can't recognize, is embodied in Jesus.

This king triumphs and reigns through the power of grace, mercy, and love. Many of us don't have a lot of experience receiving those gifts from other people. Think of the damage that does in lives that are already difficult. Think of the longing you have to know those gifts: to be loved without limit, accepted, and forgiven. That is the promise that Jesus offers again and again to us every day of our lives.

This day invites us—actually, Jesus is always inviting us—to follow and embrace this upside-down kingdom: to care about those on the margins; to let go of our need to judge; to serve however we can with whatever gifts we've been given; to listen to and be led by this king. The supposed “power” of the powerful is so seductive, whispering those promises to us that sound so alluring and can never deliver. But love—in Jesus' kingdom of reversal--love always wins.