

“NOT FROM THIS WORLD”

John 18:33-37

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

We’ve come to the last Sunday of the church year, called “Reign of Christ” Sunday, or, traditionally, “Christ the King.” By this calendar designation, the church leaves no doubt who gets the last word over the kingdoms of this world. We do not celebrate this feast at the beginning or in the middle of the year. No, on the very last Sunday of the year, the last word is this: Jesus is Lord and no other. Jesus is King and no other. Jesus is President and no other. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the first and the last. He reigns supreme over all creatures and creation. All rulers and authorities are subject to him. All power in heaven and on earth belong to him.

In the meantime, however, Jesus’ name puts him at odds with the rulers and authorities of this age. John pulls us into Pilate’s headquarters to witness a mind-bending conversation about divine power. In this brief exchange, Pilate is trying to determine if Jesus is the King of the Jews, and therefore, a potential threat to Pilate’s own power. But in the course of the conversation, Jesus makes a very peculiar claim: “My kingdom is not from this world.”

Hearing this strange claim, I see three ways to understanding it:

- 1) The first way is to hear it as Pilate did. Pilate hears Jesus mention something about “my kingdom” and responds, “So you are king.” Pilate thereby demonstrates his inability to think in any other way than a plain sense. A king is a king. Kings jostle for power. Pilate is thinking, “Jesus says he has a kingdom, then he must have ambitions like mine, and there’s not going to be room for both of us. One of us has to go, and it’s not going to be me.”
*What this way of reading we’ll call the **Primitive sense**, because it is fear-based. It ignores Jesus’ claim that his kingdom is not from this world. Jesus is not a king with a sword. If he were that kind of king, he tells Pilate, then his military would be fighting to defend him. But that’s not the kind of king he is.*
- 2) The second way of reading Jesus’ claim is more likely the way most of us have been taught to read it. We emphasize the phrase, “not of this world.” We’re ready to profess Jesus as Lord and king, but only in a spiritual sense. We don’t think of Jesus’ claim to kingship as being in conflict with the rulers of our own age. We believe in keeping religion and politics separate. We’re quite happy to leave Thomas Jefferson’s wall between church and state standing and well-maintained. All we need to do is go to church and love God and our neighbor and pay our taxes and enough with the rabble rousing.
*This way of reading we’ll call the **Domesticated sense**, because it tames Jesus. It not only ignores Jesus’ claim to real kingship, but also the way Jesus’ specific encounters with rulers and authorities foreshadow a consistent pattern of conflict between Jesus’ followers and the rulers of this age. There is hardly a chapter in the Book of Acts*

that doesn't involve Christians in conflict with some kind of authority. They seem to make it into the police blotter in every city they visit. They aren't trying to get arrested, of course. They are simply following Jesus, and it gets them in big trouble repeatedly. But the domesticated sense prefers comfort and safety. This is why many churches today have no passion and direction. They play it safe, never calling the rulers and authorities into question. Their missions pose no threat to the status quo. Their ministries do little to address the most pressing problems of our time.

- 3) But there's a third way to read Jesus' strange claim, and it is this way that I believe we're all truly hungry to hear, even if we might not know it yet. The third way of reading Jesus' claim to a kingship not of this world is to take seriously every word Jesus says—both his claim to kingship, as well as the nature of his kingship. *This way of reading we may call the **Undomesticated sense**, because it invites us to neither into a politics of violence nor a politics of passivity. Rather, it calls us to a politics of truth, no matter how safe or endangered or ostracized it may make us. In all things, we pursue the truth we know in Jesus Christ, even if it makes us look strange to our own friends and neighbors. Jesus tells Pilate, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

That famous image of the Good Shepherd comes from this same gospel. And so, we commend to ourselves this idea, this question of which voice we are listening to when it comes to the politics of this age and the age to come. When we think about the voices we listen to throughout any given week, do we ever question those voices as to whether sound like Jesus?

When we listen to authorities and rulers of this age and their voices, do we ever compare and contrast them with Jesus' own voice. Do their voices sound like the voices of the church's preaching, Bible study, communion, and fellowship with one another? Do we ever try to determine where these voices dovetail with Jesus' voice, and where they depart?

What voices do you listen to during the week? Are they angry voices, or are they calm? Are they voices given to fight, or are they voices given to reconciliation? Whom do these voices serve? Who is paying for these voices to shout? Do these voices sound like Jesus? Are they telling the truth?

We are hearing it said, more and more often, if you're reading the same paper, and listening to the same voices that I am, that our nation is becoming as divided as it was during pre-Civil War days. This is something that presses on me as a pastor. In fact, I stew about often. Any given day, you can find me in my office just stewing away!

I do wonder how often we think of ourselves as a divided nation. Because I'm not sure it's that simple. I believe it's more the case that we are a manipulated nation. And the many voices we hear have a stake in our being divided. It's a concern that I have because I can't compete, and the rest of my colleagues can't compete. I get twenty minutes with you a week, and other voices have far more time with you than we could ever hope to have together on Sundays.

So, we are in competition with voices who seek to manipulate and divide us. It's the oldest trick in the book: Divide and Conquer. So yes, we are a nation divided. But even more, we are a

nation manipulated by a cacophony of voices intent on commanding our attention. Let the litmus test be that when we hear these voices, and they don't sound like Jesus, or they are not telling the truth, we turn them off.

Sometimes I think of us as being under a kind of spell. One Old Testament scholar compared sin to a miasma, a kind of dark cloud that settles on people. It's hard to explain how it descends on us. But sin begets sin. Cacophony begets cacophony. Violence begets violence, and all of a sudden, we find ourselves wondering, "How did we get here?" I'm reminded of Loretta in that old movie, *Moonstruck*—the character played by Cher—when her boyfriend says, "I've fallen in love with you." And she says, "Snap out of it!" Sometimes I wish I could say to the whole world, "Snap out of it!"

There are more primordial and more important voices that we could be listening to who tell the truth, who are not trying to manipulate us, but are trying to do good, and to bring us together and to do good work together, and to help us cross the chasms between us.

What might a church look like when it has found ways to cross these chasms of division, and to subvert the manipulative voices we're being subject to in our time. It actually comes from a little town, Nyanja, Rwanda. There is a tombstone there for a little girl named Chantal. Chantal's tombstone lies on the site of a school that was attacked by the Interahamwe—rebels who sought to keep people divided between ethnic groups called Tutsi and Hutu. Before European colonizers came to Sub-Saharan Africa, these ethnic groups lived and worked together and inter-married. Not so after colonization. After colonization, they were all given ID cards, and they were pitted against each other. They were manipulated.

In Chantal's classroom, there were both Hutu and Tutsi children. The Interahamwe came and held up the classroom. They were carrying guns and they intended to do harm, and they did terrible harm. Before they opened fire, they asked the classroom to divide itself between Hutu and Tutsi. But a strange thing happened. The children didn't obey. They didn't move to one side of the room and to the other. They stayed together. When the survivors of the attack were later asked how they thought something like this could have happened in a country as divided as Rwanda, one teacher could think of one reason. We mentioned there was a class on unity and reconciliation, where the children heard many stories about Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. He believed somehow the stories took root in the children's fellowship, and became more important than the divisions they were told they should have.

These are simple acts of resistance and non-violence, as gentle and quiet as the gestures of friendship that often go unnoticed in our own church. Gentle acts of tenderness and kindness in Bible Study classes, at choir practice, beside a hospital bed, on a car ride, at a dinner table. In spite of our supposed differences, we still gather at tables, whether family or friends, whether Democrat or Republican, whether rich or poor. Who could count the acts of gentleness and kindness here that might condition and train us to be resistant to the manipulative voices of our time?

Scholar David Rensburger, said of this text that Jesus description of the church being “not of this world” is really an invitation into a dangerous social relocation.¹ Such a relocation doesn’t make us safe, but it makes us true.

Philippians says we are called to be a colony of heaven—a colony of heaven on earth as we cling tightly to our life giver, the Lord Jesus Christ, who continually subdues everything to himself.

So, yes, while I worry in a pastoral way, I am also confident that God shapes us into Christ’s reconciling mission through the sacred practices of our liturgy, the personalities among our fellowship, and the ministries and missions commended to us. These things have a way of training us and making us into this colony in heaven. Imagine, if a Sociologist were to begin to observe us, wouldn’t they be a little confused when they look at us in view of the divisions of our time? “Look at these people,” they might say. “They’re a bit strange. Not quite as divided as I expected. “An odd bunch that First Baptist congregation is!”

In this time of increasing tribalism, what if people became to know us as a unique, strange, odd, “parable” king of tribe? To what tribe would you say you belong? Democrat? Republican? Why belong to either? We belong to the Christian tribe. The Tribe for all Tribes! T

Each one of us, I bet, falls somewhere on a kind of worldly spectrum. Democrat. Republican, etc. We tend to look at everything through these worldly lenses. And we hear everything we hear from these kinds of atmospheres.

I bet everybody here, if you put that worldly spectrum in front of us, and invited us to put our dot somewhere along the spectrum. We’d put it somewhere that leaned a little bit more to the Left, or a little bit more to the Right.

But what if we did away with that whole spectrum? And we stopped thinking of ourselves as “either”, “or”, but both “and.” I’m not a Democrat. I’m not a Republican. I’m not going to look at the world through these lenses because there are manipulative voices that are seeking to divide us, in those categories, and I’m going to resist that.

I’m not a Democrat or Republican. I’m a Christian. Say it with me...*I am not a Democrat or Republican. I am a Christian.*

I do sometimes wonder if most of us pastors are looked on by their congregation by someone, somewhere, as being “one or the other.” There is someone here who is probably looking on me with suspicion right now. “I bet he’s ‘one’ or the ‘other.’” If I may put you at ease...I am neither, nor. I am a Christian. I seek the truth in all things.

Well, maybe I am a little bit conservative. I do read the Bible a lot. But I’m also conservative. I’m interested in conserving the resources of our planet. I’m interested in conserving our rivers and our mountains. I’m a conservative because I don’t want our mountains blown up to harvest

¹ David Rensberger. *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 26-27.

coal! But, I'm also a liberal. I am *quite* liberal, because I hope for life in every circumstance. I hope for life in the womb, and I hope for life on death row. Very liberal, you see! Or am I?

How these categories crumble so quickly when we subject them to Jesus' strange criteria. That's the kind of people we're called to be—people who don't "make sense" in light of worldly categories. Rather, we're made able through worship and the Scriptures to subject all things to the truth of Jesus Christ.

The scholar, Curtis Freeman, in his new book, *Undomesticated Dissent*, draws our attention to a cemetery called Bunhill Fields in North London.² Bunhill actually comes from the word "bone hill," because it was where they dumped thousands of bodies of those who died from the plague. When the plague passed, they used it to bury the bodies of the malcontents and dissenters, radicals and alternative thinkers. And there in the middle of the cemetery lie John Bunyan, William James, and Daniel Defoe. Freeman asks us to wonder, "What are the stories that led them to this alternative burial ground? What kind of lives did they lead that the rulers and authorities rejected them? Daniel Defoe and John Bunyan authored the two most published books in the English Language, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, respectively. But now their bodies lie in a renegade graveyard.

It makes me wonder about our own Sacred Garden. What if, in one hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred years from now, tourists came to Asheville—not only for the scenery and the beer— but to trace their fingers across the names of people among our congregation who just didn't make sense, but whose lives gave rise to an enduring beauty across space and time that you just couldn't capture by any worldly category?

One can never know...but, as Jesus' voice reaches deeper and deeper into our imaginations, and Christ's absolute sovereignty captivates us entirely, it just might be your name their fingers trace.

² Curtis W. Freeman. *Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity* (Baylor University Press, 2017) xi. I highly recommend Freeman's book, especially the bracing but hope-filled final chapter, "Postapocalyptic Dissent."