

“Out of Touch with Reality”

John 18:33-37

Andrew Foster Connors

Christ the King Sunday

November 22, 2009

Leonard Beechy tells of the hush that followed when a rabbi asked his seminary class, “If Jesus was messiah, where is shalom?”¹ I’ve heard this question touted by some Christians as evidence for why Jews “missed the messiah.” “They were expecting a different kind of king,” it is said, “so they could not see the messiah right in front of them.” Yet, the rabbi’s question has always struck me as the reasonable one.

Where is the shalom? Where is the kingdom that has been promised? In the hospital room where the monitors trace what is not working as it should, where is the kingdom of shalom? In the family relationship that will not have changed since the last Thanksgiving meal, where is the kingdom of shalom? At stoplights where the poor or the addicted trudge past cars with their beggar’s cups, where is the king of shalom? In the anxious air that we breathe, where is shalom?

Pilate is equally perplexed. So you are a king? He, too, seems to be expecting someone with a bit more gravitas. Not a king without a security detail. Not a king without an army. Not a king without the means to secure the right ends. Not a king who does not fight back even when beaten and bloodied. If you are a king, where is your power?

There have been times when the church compensated Jesus’ lack of force by asserting its own. If the power and the glory of Jesus looked questionable, we could answer it with our own. Exert our power in the foundations of our cathedrals. Exert our power in the politics of nation-states and empires. Exert our power in the triumph of our doctrines, the victories of our bloody swords. Jesus would not fight but his followers would. Jesus would not exert his power, but his followers would. Jesus would not win but surely his followers would.

And though we in this congregation reject the conquests of the past; though we are suspicious of the triumphalism of any faith, I can’t help feel that we, too, long for that kingly Jesus. You know, the one who could clean up the messes that we make. The one who could protect your child when you kiss her on the forehead and try not to imagine all of the what-ifs on the other side of the front door. The one who could promise you when you lose your job that your car, or your house, or your family won’t go with it. The one who could promise that you will age with grace, that you will die with dignity. The one who could save a child from the streets, a sibling from the bottle, a friend from taking his own life. If Jesus is the king, then where is the power? where is the shalom?

“My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus tells Pilate. “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. . .” We do not necessarily want a Jesus with followers who fight – not in this congregation. But we do not want to see our God-in-the-flesh weak before us, either. We know enough of human weakness. We know enough of limitation. We need a God to pick up the reigns where we drop them, to fill in

¹ Leonard Beechy, “A New Kind of King,” *The Christian Century*, November 17, 2009

the gaps where we leave them, to pick up our slack. The kingdom that Jesus brings does not have to be from this world, but it should be able to contend with it.

That's our problem on Christ the King Sunday. We worship a king who looks nothing like the ones we've known, who does nothing like the ones we've known, who has no kingdom like the ones we've known. A king that we want to see, that we've come to expect to see, maybe the teachings of the church have taught us to expect to see. The God who whips the world into shape. The God who gives arrogant power what's coming to it. The God who fixes all the problems that we see so clearly inside and outside of us – problems we haven't been able to fix on our own.

Instead the king we see is the one who is headed to the cross, where John tries to argue against all evidence to the contrary, that he will be enthroned as the king the world has been waiting to welcome. Like Pilate, I have a hard time receiving this kind of kingdom.

Yet when I consider all of the brokenness in the world, or even just the brokenness I've known this week, the kingdoms of this world don't look so helpful. Last Saturday we heard the news that a friend from seminary – 38 years old healthy young man- died of a heart attack. What king from this world can undo the tears of a spouse who misses her beloved, or a little child who misses his father? On Tuesday, a friend sat in court waiting to testify in her friend's divorce trial. The force of law may bring a measure of justice. But no judge can bring forgiveness that leads to healing. On Thursday, the presbytery debated gay marriage. An overture that our session endorsed passed 75-62. Perhaps changes will be made. Rules and laws might change. But we all know that legal changes, on their own, cannot change the hearts of people – and that's what we long for.

As much as we yearn for a God to pick up the reigns where we drop them, to fill in the gaps where we leave them, to do what needs to be done, there is no amount of force that can repair a broken heart. There is no unilateral power that can make right a broken family. There is nothing that our world names as power that can touch the wounds that death leaves behind. That kind of kingdom isn't going to bring us what we really need.

Father Rich Bozzelli the priest down the street challenged us one time with the theological idea that if God is love then God can only act in and through love. Or said differently, Jesus could not come down off the cross even if he wanted to. He could only act through love. I've resisted that theology. I prefer to think that God is capable of doing anything that God imagines. I prefer to think if Jesus stays on the cross it's because he chooses to. But whether he chooses to love this way or is restricted to it, it seems to me that the Jesus we see before Pilate is convinced that our notions of kingship, of power, of force will never bring us the kind of healing that we need, will never bring us the kind of justice that we long for, will never bring our planet the peace that we pray for; he is convinced that the kind of power we long for in our world, to come and make things right, to come and fix what we have broken is not always or perhaps ultimately what we need.

What he appears to think that we need is a king to teach the people how to love. How to cry with friends whose friend has died. How to heal with presence and with prayers. How to stand with those who are broken because of poverty, race, or difference. How to form a community that breaks bread together and always has leftovers to share. That is what Jesus appears to think we need to be taught as human beings. That is what Jesus appears to think will begin to usher in his kind of kingdom which is not from this world. Love is what will change the world.

Pilate wasn't convinced. To him, Jesus must have seemed out of touch with reality. You can teach the people a radical way of living, but a posture like Jesus' will eventually land you in trouble. And maybe we're not convinced, either. Most of the conversation I hear about what we need to learn is about preparing human beings for tomorrow, giving us a firm foundation in the knowledge economy, strengthening our skills, our ability to manipulate the world around us to our liking. Most of us do not set as a priority for ourselves learning self-giving love. To us, Jesus must seem out of touch with reality.

I don't think Jesus would disagree. He *is* out of touch with reality. The self-giving love that Jesus embodies *is* radical, foolish, and incomprehensible by our notions of power. The love that Jesus prioritizes *will* make him vulnerable to everything that we fear. The love that he teaches *is* in conflict with the kingdoms of this world, with what we are constantly told we need to know, we need to follow, we need to become.

Jesus' kingdom is not from this world, and we have to make decisions every day as to whether we want to live into his foolish kingdom or not. Whether we want to live as though self-giving love really is stronger than anything that passes for power in this world. Whether we want to choose healing over harm, community over isolation, love over fear. Whether we want to follow him when he takes up a cross instead of a sword to lead us to battle darkness armed only with the light of love. Whether we want to live as though shalom isn't as far away as we might have first imagined.

Yet before we ever have to make any of these choices we are confronted with startling good news that testifies from Pilate's interrogation chamber: in the darkest places that we can imagine – there goes our God. Where hearts have been broken – there goes our God. Where relationships end, there goes our God. Where death gives its sting – there goes our God. Where arrogant power stomps on the poor, there goes our God.

Our king does not delegate the work of love. He comes to teach us himself. If his shalom is not yet here in all its fullness, perhaps it is because his work is not yet through. Perhaps it is because the deep healing that only love can bring takes a long time.²

There are choices we will have to make this week. Maybe they confront you at work. Maybe at home. Maybe with a friend. Maybe with a neighbor. Maybe at the Thanksgiving table. You will have to make a choice to love like a fool who is out of touch with reality or not. It's a choice we will make again and again and again for the remainder of our lives.

The good news is that should you make that choice, you won't find yourself alone in your foolishness. God has already made her choice. Love has already been crowned as sovereign and supreme. Our language fails us. Kingdom doesn't quite capture it. Grace and truth have been among us. We have seen the glory that is love. Even now she comes to heal the deepest wounds, to face the coldest darkness, to crown our years with love.

² Beechy is more eloquent: "If Christ's reign has not yet succeeded in whipping the world into shape, it may be because suffering love has no whip, and drawing all things to itself is slow business." Ibid.