

Sermon November 25th, 2018

God is Our Center

In Jesus' interaction with Pilate Jesus reiterates his message. God's kingdom is different from the Empires we live in. Pilate chooses violence to deal with his opposition. Jesus chooses non-violence. Pilate's Crucifixion is a symbol of power, and is meant to invoke fear in his opposition. Jesus transforms the cross he hangs on into a symbol of self-giving love. A place where people can come and experience God. God's kingdom is different, leaving Pilate confused when Jesus tries to explain it to him.

We see this message being proclaimed from the moment Jesus comes out of the water. Everything Jesus does seems to challenge his followers to live differently than the way the Empire has taught them. Don't strive for money. Instead, be generous. Value everyone you encounter. Not just people of status. Trust in God with your life. Not Caesar. Jesus is King. Not the Emperor.

Living in a democracy we will not always connect with images of a society where people's freedoms are limited. Where people are ruled by kings or emperors. However, we do share a common struggle with all those who follow Jesus past and present. We struggle to put God first and center in our lives living in a society with a culture that more often than not counters how Jesus taught us to live.

For Paul, Peter, James, and John their letters in our Bible shed light on the many challenges they faced when trying to live Jesus's teachings out in their communities. In our story of Revelation John is a persecuted Christian who is giving hope to the persecuted believers that Jesus is the rightful king. Not the emperor. So, stay strong. Don't fall trap to this imperial culture that seems so enticing.

James witnesses the mistreatment of the poor within his congregations. Jesus breaks down the walls that status builds up. Yet, the first generation of Christians have already struggled to follow Jesus in this way. Their culture has taught them that status, power, and money is significant. So, poor people should sit on the floor while the rich enjoy the finer seating arrangements.

Paul witnesses inner strife within the church over how to live in the world as Christians. What foods can we eat? Is circumcision still mandatory? How do we function with all this diversity? How do we react to the Empire's Persecutions?

Throughout the centuries Christians have struggled to put God first and center in their lives, especially when the cultures they lived in were counter to Christ's teachings.

Well, like I said earlier, we can relate to Christians past and present. We too struggle to put God first and center in our lives. When Luther talks about the Commandments he said we don't have to look very far to see how hard it really is to follow them. We all fall short of the first commandment. To love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul.

For example, we live in a culture where we are pushed and pushed to strive for money, possessions, status, and power. Commercials telling us we need this and that. Working long hours to obtain these possessions and status. Influential voices telling us who belongs and who doesn't.

With this cultural motif: everything is for sale. We struggle to practice the generosity Jesus practices. Our minds are shaped to buy things. Not give things away. We even turn people into commodities.

This in turn leads us to think we always need more. We end up living in scarcity. Clinging to everything we have. Living with this constant anxiety that we don't have enough.

Our need for more then dictates how we sacrifice our time. With the work we need to put in, to make the kind of money that has us living up to our cultural expectations. We end up sacrificing time from those we love. We end up struggling to make time for worship, prayer, and hearing the Word of God. Practices of faith that help us place God first in our lives.

With these influential voices challenging us to see this person negatively or that person negatively. We stop valuing everyone we encounter. We start to marginalize people who do not fit in to the norms these voices create. We struggle to love our neighbor as ourselves.

When this culture of commercialism and exclusion start to influence us we no longer trust God with our lives, but Caesar. We don't see Jesus as our king, but those emperors who try to dictate our lives.

Yes, we live in a democracy, but we are still vulnerable to cultural practices that challenge our ability to follow Jesus. To love in impossible ways. To give in insurmountable ways. To trust in unimaginable ways. As Jesus does throughout his ministry.

When Jesus comes to his disciples. When Jesus comes to us in our baptism. Jesus invites us to follow him. To see Jesus as our king. To put God at the center of our lives. To live differently from the Empire.

Why? Because Jesus hopes that by following him we will be a reflection of the kingdom of God in this world. Through our generosity, inclusivity, and self-giving love we will change the societies we live in.

When Jesus is talking to Pilate it may seem like he is talking about this kingdom from another world. But, that is not exactly what he is saying to Pilate. God's kingdom has come to challenge the Empire. But, not in the way Pilate would expect. Not with violence. Not with power. Not with creating dividing lines.

God's kingdom has broken into our world, and we experience it through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We experience it through us, the church, the followers of Jesus. Whenever we imitate Christ in the world.

Jesus teaches us the way. Jesus teaches us the importance of Sabbath rest, of taking time to worship, to reflect on Scripture, to pray.

Jesus teaches us to be generous. To help those in need. To trust in God's abundance and love for us.

Jesus teaches us forgiveness and openness to value everyone we encounter. To create bridges of healing and reconciliation. To see that God's gracious love reflected in Christ's self-giving love reassures us of that safety net we all need from time to time.

This Advent season, our congregation is encouraged to come together to support one another as we try to follow Jesus. We are all invited to take part in a discipleship challenge, challenging us to put God first in our lives during probably one of the busiest times of the year. It won't be easy.

Only by God's grace will we make our mark. Because, when we can follow Jesus in our daily lives. When we hear God's words of hope in the story of the baby Jesus. When we stretch our hands out and pray remembering God's constant presence in our lives. When we gather here together to hear and experience God's love in Word and Sacrament. When we open our hearts to be generous. To live our lives from a place of abundance not scarcity. Then we see our society changing before our eyes. We see the love of God hitting even the most marginalized people in our societies. Then we experience the kingdom of God. Then we see Christ our king.

Let us pray, gracious God. Encourage us to follow you. When we fall short lift us up. When we make our mark change us. Change our neighbor. And may we always strive to put you first in our lives and in our hearts. **Amen.**