

Sermon - 11/25/18
“The Servant King”
Rev. 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37
Reign of Christ
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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This past Spring, on May 19th, two billion people watched the Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church—and North Carolina native--Michael Curry, deliver his sermon on the *redemptive power of love* at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle (now the Duke and Duchess of Sussex) at Windsor Castle.

He said most memorably:

“Love is the way. Love is the only way. Those who follow in my way follow in the way of unconditional, unselfish, sacrificial love. And that kind of love can change the world.”¹

Elected in 2015, he is the first African-American to lead the Episcopal Church. He was previously bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. A noted advocate for human rights and author of several books, Bishop Curry is recognized as one of the most popular preachers in the English language.

The world has now met Bishop Curry and has been moved by his riveting, hopeful, and deceptively simple message: *love and acceptance are what we need in these strange times.*

I want you to think about Bishop Curry’s words in terms of our Gospel reading from John 18 for today. Pilate asks Jesus, “*So you are a [monarch]?*” (v. 37). And Jesus says, “*My [dominion] is not from this world.*” (v. 36).

Now (listen carefully!), it would be a *mistake* to take these words from Jesus and use them to entrench an *unsurpassable divide* between God’s dominion (one the one hand) and our earthly realm (on the other). Because Jesus said that his [reign] is “*not from this world,*” some see no need to be concerned about God’s [reign] on earth, because we can just wait for it in the afterlife. Sound familiar?

But such ideas misread what Jesus is actually talking about. You see, Jesus’ comment is *not* about the *location* of his reign, but (rather) is about its *origin, source, and strength.*

So, when Jesus says, “*my dominion is not from here,*” it means, *my dominion has its origin in God.*” And Jesus tells his followers that if they want to be a part of his dominion, they are to **love** one another (e.g. John 13:31-35).

And this means—as Bishop Curry asserted—that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (God’s love) are not just *pleasant pieties* only for the *inside* of church walls but are *for the whole world* to know.

As the Rev, Dr. Jennifer Lord, Professor of Homiletics at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, has put it—we are to live our faith so that it impacts this world:

“This means that water (metaphorically) turns to wine, systems break open, the dead rise. New life is not only possible but promised. The church can live this piety by protesting legislation that sanctions racial profiling

¹ Michael Curry, “*The Power of Love,*” Penguin Books (Avery), NY, 2018

in U.S. border states and elsewhere, teaching agricultural technology to peasants in southern Sudan, providing reproductive information for teachers to give to girls and boys and women and men. This piety responds faithfully to God and is, at times, at odds with the church.”²

I think this is interesting because here we witness (what the Rev. Brad Roth, a Mennonite pastor, calls) the *sacrificial regency* of Christ, the one who came *not to be served but to serve*, the one who “did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6). Christ’s glory comes by way of the cross. [It’s a paradox]. The polarities of his kingship are reversed. And we, the people drawn to him by his lifting up on the cross, have become a kingdom, “priests serving his God and Father,” says Revelation, whose vision of power is reversed as well. The cross of Christ calls power into question but also serves as the basis for a different sort of power.

For example, we see the way that Jesus the king who is crucified calls into question the assumptions of power in this scene in John 18. Who stands before who? Who interrogates who? Who is the king? Not the one who commands iron legions but the one who willingly lays down his life for the sheep. “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus, speaking of his kingship and more. But brutality and blood have crumpled Pilate’s sense of truth down into irony. “What is truth?” he asks.

For Christians, (says Roth) this means that any exercise of power that does not trace back to the *self-sacrificial love of the cross* is illegitimate, having lost its proper grounding in the *cruciform mandate* of God ... it’s really about how we live day to day, how we want and how we purpose, how we steward influence, money, position, and all the rest toward God’s ends on behalf of the least of these. It’s power set to work with and under and no longer over, at least not over in the same way.

So Jesus’ *cruciform kingdom* is the basis for a different sort of power. But Roth concludes by saying that most of us have never been totally convinced that we believe or want this version of power. We’re the crowd, crowing for Barabbas with his base but reliable power, whetted sharp and holstered up. But the church, wended throughout the world, has stumbled when it’s leaned on *Barabbas-power* but won when it’s played the *long game* of faithful dependence on the Lamb that was slain. Parades of nuclear-tipped military power snaking through concrete capitals impress, but the cross in its *turnabout mystery* wins in the end.³

Think of it this way:

It was the Schnitzer’s second Hanukkah in Billings, Montana, and five-year-old Isaac wanted the menorah to be in his bedroom window. But as Isaac and his sister, Rachel, prepared for bed, a brick hurled from the street sent shards of glass flying through the room.

The day after the incident, an FBI agent advised the family to get bulletproof glass in their windows and to take down the menorahs. Instead, they decided to put the menorah back in the window and call the local newspaper.

The next morning, a member of the local Congregational Church read the story and phoned her pastor.

Within days, the word was out, and paper menorahs were distributed for display in windows throughout town. The Target store had some plastic menorahs but soon sold out. An antique store in Billings reported a Christian woman buying a very expensive antique menorah to place in her window. The marquee at the Catholic High School read, *Happy Hanukkah to our Jewish friends*.

² Jennifer Lord, *Proper 29, (Reign of Christ)*, Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2011, p. 499

³ Brad Roth, “*The Cross is Both Foundation and Anti-Foundation, Disturber of Worlds,*” *The Christian Century*, October 18, 2018

Soon, hundreds of homes in Billings had menorahs in their windows. Some were shot out by bullets, some shattered by bricks. Hate calls were made to Christian families. Margaret MacDonald, whose idea it was to put up the paper menorahs, said she thought it would be a simple thing for people to do. But when she went to put the menorah in her own window, she hesitated: *“With two young children, I had to think hard about it myself. We put our menorah in a living room window and made sure nobody sat in front of it.”* The community would not be intimidated. Each night of Hanukkah more and more menorahs were placed in windows. The local newspaper printed a brightly colored full-page menorah, urging its 56,000 subscribers to place them in their windows.

On the last night of Hanukkah, thousands of homes had menorahs in them. As the Schnitzer’s drove around town that night, Isaac saw all of the houses with menorahs in their windows and exclaimed, *“I didn’t know so many people were Jewish!”*⁴

It seems that this *cruciform kingdom* is a *kingdom without walls*—this gospel makes an appeal to us to tear down the walls, to reach out to those who are strangers, those who are far off, those against whom we harbor prejudice—even our enemies.

Friends, I’ll leave you this morning with a wonderful poem by Cynthia Langston Kirk, titled, *Kingdom Without Walls*—a poem that captures the essence of both of our scripture readings for today:

*Imagine a place
Where mercy resides,
Love forms each heart,
Compassion lived out with grit and determination,
A place where lavish signs
Mark each path barrier free.*

*Imagine a place
Where skin tones are celebrated
Like the hues of tulips in springtime.
Where languages inspire
With symphonies of diversity.
In custom and history
And every conversation
Begins with a bow of reverence.*

*Imagine a place where each person wears glasses,
Clarity of vision for all.
Recognizing each one, everything
Made in the image of God.*

*Imagine a place
Where carrots and pasta
Doctor’s skills and medications
Are not chained behind barbed wire—*

⁴ See *“A Community Responds to Hatred,”* Congregation Or Ami, <http://www.orami.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=3857>; and *“Not in Our Town,”* Facing History and Ourselves, www.facinghistory.org/explore/exhibit/stories/niot/read

Food, shelter, health care available for all.

*Imagine a place where
Every key of oppression
Was melted down to form public art
Huge fish, doves, lions, and lambs
On which children could play.*

*Imagine a place where
People no longer kept watch
Through the front window
To determine whether the welcome mat
Would remain on the porch.*

*Such is the work
The journey
The destination
In the kingdom of God.*

Amen.