**Text**: John 18:33-37

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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November 25, 2018 – Christ the King On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)  
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

**Theme**: “Who’s Your King: Pilate or Christ?”

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There were two brothers, Michael and David, who were absolute and complete opposites. Michael was a successful businessman in New York; David took seasonal jobs at dude ranches, parks and resorts. Concerned for David's welfare, Michael, the businessman from New York, tried to entice David with the so-called good life. He would send David photos labeled, "my new sound system," or "my new car,” highlighting the latest things his big money could buy. This went on for a while until David sent Michael a beautiful picture, showing the breathtaking view of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park. On the back, David wrote, "my back yard."

Opposites. Have you ever thought about how opposite people can be? Sometimes, we say this is all for the good—like two people in a relationship. Opposites do sometimes attract, and some people can use it as a platform to a good life. Of course, when the couple hangs out with one person’s prior friends, the question often becomes: “what in the world did she ever see in him?”, or “what in the world did he ever see in her?” But sometimes the beauty of opposites is that two seemingly totally different views can lead to a clarifying of what is really important in life.

In today’s gospel we see a total contrast of opposites. We see two people who represent two different worlds. On the one hand, we have Pilate, who represents the political, totally this-worldly point of view. Pilate is in apparent rule over everybody including Jesus, since he is the Roman ruler with jurisdiction in Israel. Pilate seems to measure everything according to his position. Power for Pilate is control and authority, the kind of power that leads to giving orders and pushing people around.

On the other hand, we have Jesus. Jesus primarily represents a religious or spiritual viewpoint. Really, Jesus wants to change things right now to a different viewpoint: to bring heaven to earth right now. Jesus’ power is not positional power, at least for now, but is the authority of His person, being the Son of God. Power for Jesus is relational—reflected most clearly in love and forgiveness. Jesus’ power changes things right now, as it leads to people treating one another well-- with love and respect. Although Pilate appears to rule, at least for now, Jesus really has jurisdiction over Pilate. It ultimately—at a time we do not know-- leads to the whole world being transformed in the complete reign of Jesus Christ in the world.   
 ‘Who’s Your King? Who’s the One who Rules over your heart?” Hopefully, as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday today, you can say it is Jesus Christ. We gather today to celebrate the triumph of Christ’s power of love and forgiveness over all other powerful forces in the world. To understand this we need to follow the guidance of our gospel for today, We need to channel the power of the One who not only spoke truth to secular power, but also lived it. We go back to the One who begins His reign in the world shortly after His death on a Cross on Golgotha Hill.

The evangelist John tells our story today as a direct encounter between two people—Jesus and Pilate. This is not unusual for John because he often takes two opposites like light and darkness, life and death and teaches us through them. As John tells the story of the last week of Jesus’ earthly life before resurrection, it is really an encounter between truth and falsehood. We join this encounter in process. Earlier in chapter 18 after Judas comes to find Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is taken to the Jewish religious authorities, Anna and Caiaphas. Annas questions him as to the content of his teaching, to which Jesus replies, “This is who I am. I have said everything openly.”

Then because the Jewish authorities need the Roman power to get a death sentence for Jesus, they take Him to Pilate. Pilate was appointed by the Roman Caesar to rule over Judah—so he was “the power” in the land. Pilate questions Jesus to find out if he can convict him on the charge of sedition against the government. He asks Him a pointed question: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus answers with another question, “who really wants to know?” Pilate replies by passing the buck: “your own Jewish leaders say you have claimed to be a king? Have you?” To this Jesus replies: “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might be handed over to the Jews.” Jesus does not deny that he is a king, but he says he is a different kind of king—no threat to the Roman government, because His kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. Pilate still isn’t satisfied and asks him point blank: “So you are a king?” Jesus replies, “you say that I am a king. But I came into the world for one thing and one thing only—to bear witness to the truth. I came to usher in a kingdom of love and forgiveness.” To this Pilate replies, “what is truth?” for which there is no answer given, but only the power of Jesus’ presence. In effect in John’s gospel we are to read back to chapter 14 when Jesus proclaimed, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.” We are to realize that if we follow Jesus, we know the truth. For He said in John 8, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

The point of this incident for us is that Jesus is the true king, the right one to follow as ruler over our lives. Even at the time in which Jesus is under trial by Pilate, He is in the process of demonstrating His kingship. Jesus is in the process of becoming the ruler of the world. Through the help of Pilate handing Him over to the crowds, Jesus is destroying the power of sin and death in the world. Through His going to the Cross, according to John, He is overcoming the power of those who would hold out for political rule to be more important. Although we await His coming again to overcome all powers in the world, the victory has already been won. As many writers have said, “the war has been won, although a skirmish or two still goes on in the world.”

This stark contrast between Jesus and Pilate highlights how the ways of God and the ways of human beings are totally different. We often value the power and authority of normal human beings who are in ruling positions, but they almost always value their rule more than they value others. By lording it over others, they appear to be in complete and total charge. But this encounter points out that the true king is not Pilate the Roman on the throne of the kingdom that rules Israel. He only appears to be king. He too, like all rulers before and after him, will surrender his/her kingdom in the world, at his/her death.

The real king is Jesus! For ultimately the qualities that Jesus embodies are those of what true and benevolent rule is all about—caring for others and ruling with respect and dignity. Jesus will take abuse for these very qualities, and ultimately may die for these qualities. He will stay true to Himself, even in death. Ultimately, Jesus the King will demonstrate that the very principles by which He lives are the principles by which we are to live. They are the true and right things not only for King Jesus, but for His subjects. They are the real power in the world.

Who’s our King—Pilate (and all he represents) or Jesus (and all for which He stands)? We have a choice to make in terms of who we will follow. It will make all the difference in the world as to whose values we follow. A good analogy to this is the way we approached this past Thursday and Friday. What dominated our living on Thanksgiving and Black Friday? On Thursday many of us gathered with our families for Thanksgiving. Did we soak ourselves with remembrance? Was our primary celebration one of counting our blessings of having a gracious God who has given us all other relationships? Or did Black Friday dominate our commemoration of these last several days? But for many increasingly Thanksgiving has become a day to plan for the big day of shopping on Black Friday. Some stores even open by 2 p.m. on Thursday with their Black Friday deals. Really, that choice is an indication of “who is Lord of our lives, who’s our king.”

Our approach these past several days may even shape the way we look at Christmas, just five weeks away. For us as Christians today’s gospel directs us toward placing the bulk of our preparation around celebrating Jesus’ birth. It leads us to ask: “Are we going to use this pre-Christmas season to forget about where it all ends on earth for Jesus? Are we going to celebrate Jesus as all the forces of the culture want us to do, by buying the biggest and brightest toys and making ourselves momentarily feel good? Or, “are we going to celebrate Jesus who brings us the truly most important gifts of salvation and peace through love and forgiveness? Are we going to celebrate how God was not so great that He wasn’t willing to send His son into the world, but whose wooden manger eventually led to a wooden Cross? Are we going to celebrate the One who was crowned not with a golden miter like a pope or bishop, but with a “cut into your skin” crown of thorns (as pictured so well on the front cover of our bulletin)?

Whose kingdom do we ultimately belong to—the kingdom of Pilate or the kingdom of Jesus? As many rulers in the world seem to live by principles more like Pilate and less like Jesus, how can we reflect principles that demonstrate that we are subjects to the kingdom rule of Jesus? Like Jesus, we are called to be servants. Like Jesus we value the power of love and forgiveness over the power of vengeance and control. We are citizens of the kingdom of God, which has made its entrance in Jesus and which is ultimately the only power that really matters in the world.

Pastor David Lose writes, “we are called to witness to the One who demonstrated power through weakness, who manifested strength through vulnerability,  
who established justice through mercy, and who built the kingdom of God by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world, taking its [pain](http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/christ-the-king-b-not-of-this-world/) into his own body, dying the death it sought, and rising again to remind us that light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hate, and that with God, all good things are possible. In refusing to use the power of violence Dr. Martin Luther King once famously said, ‘The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.’”

Pilate or Jesus—a simple choice. But is it? We live in both worlds. As Lutherans we are said to be in the world, but not of the world. What does that mean for us living in 2018? How can we live out our allegiances today?

I think a key to answering that question is by answering Pilate’s final question, “what is truth?”. Paul writes to the Philippians in chapter four: “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

We are to stand firm in the Lord for how Jesus lived and for what Paul preached. Living by grace through faith. Being gentle, honorable, just, and pure. Letting peace and love win out over conflict and hatred in our lives. Following the example of the One who first loved us and demonstrated to us how to love others.

I want to close with an old story about following the example of Jesus’ love and forgiveness in our lives. It is about the Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci. During the time when Leonardo was working on his famous painting, The Last Supper, he became angry with an acquaintance of his. The two men had words and parted from each other on very bad terms. Leonardo returned to the church on whose wall he was painting the fresco. It was no use. Leonardo could paint nothing he was happy with. It just so happened that he had reached the point in the project where he was doing the face of Jesus. Time and again he tried to render a passable likeness of the Lord, but he was unable to do so. Finally, the great artist realized he had work to do, but it was not in the church he had been commissioned to decorate. Leonardo put down his brushes and palette and sought out the man who had been the subject of his wrath. He asked the man's forgiveness. The man accepted his apology and offered an apology of his own. It was only then that Leonardo was able to return to the church and finish painting the face of Jesus.?

Christ reigns in the world wherever peace and love win out over revenge and hatred. What does that mean for how we live our lives right here, right now? May we show our allegiance to Christ the King by letting Christ be ruler of our lives. Amen.