



TOUCH POINT

A Different Kingdom – Touchpoint for November 17, 2021

John 18:33-37 (NRSV) ³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters^[a] again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

*Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me...
Jesus replied, ‘My kingdom is not from here’.”*

Let me say right off the bat, this isn’t going to be a fun one. I was hoping once we got through the gospel of Mark, things would be a little easier. I was getting a little tired of readings on divorce and the impossibility of rich people getting into heaven. The blind beggar, Bartimaeus story, was no picnic either. So, I was kind of hoping when we got into John’s gospel today, it might be a little easier. But I’m finding that’s not the case.

Maybe if I just do a Touchpoint on the historical dynamics of the situation. You know, leave it in the past some 2000 years ago. That would certainly make it safer, easier to deal with. But that’s not what this time together is about. To quote my friend and boss, Eric, “Jim, I want to hear your struggles with the text.” OK Eric, be careful what you wish for.

Pilate says to Jesus, “I am not a Jew... Your own nation and religious leaders have handed me over to you.”

So, to summarize, Jesus is killed by the collaboration of the political and religious authorities supported by an angry mob.

Or in other words... Jesus is killed in the name of “God and country”.

Let me quote again from Barbara Brown Taylor, who I quoted last week:

“Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware of those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God’s will from their own.”

What do we do with this bible passage? It’s a hard thing to hear when you realize that for the last 1700 years, western Christianity (God) has been wedded to “country.” Ever since Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the religious coin of the realm, Christianity has been the official or de facto religion of every country in the West. “God and country” are in the air we breathe and the water we drink.

Christianity has been a co-opted religion the last 1700 years in the western world.

So, how do we reconcile that fact with the words from Jesus in this passage, “My kingdom is not from this world.”? How do we reconcile these words with the fact that Christianity, in the Western world, has been

spread almost exclusively through political might and force, the conquering of lands and people?

If Jesus' Kingdom is not from this world, then we can't use God to defend our country, and we can't use country to defend our God. When the gospel has to resort to force, it ceases being the gospel.

Now when Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from this world." He does not mean his kingdom is not active in this world. It's very active. In fact, it's subversive. It's why he was killed. Jesus' kingdom is very much in this world, but it does not operate in the same way of the world. This is what Jesus means when he says his kingdom is not **from** this world. It doesn't derive its power or authority from the same source of the world's kingdoms. The reign of God is much different from the reign of political rulers, but it is still active and at work in this world.

Kings in this world, and political power in this world, come by way of force. But that is not the way of Jesus. That is not the way of God's kingdom.

"The last shall be first and the first shall be last."

"If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, you must first be a servant of all."

Jesus' kingdom is present whenever the hungry are fed, rather than have their resources cut. It's present whenever the homeless are sheltered, rather than demonized. It's there whenever children are welcomed, rather than put in cages.

And so, the ways of the world and the ways of God's reign are often in conflict. And that can be difficult for us. Nadia Bolz-Weber put it well when someone asked her, "What do you do to be close to God?" And she answered, in effect, "Why would I want to get close to God? God tells me to forgive my enemy, and seventy times seven. God tells me to turn the other cheek when someone strikes me. God tells me if I have two coats to give one away to the one who has no coat. Why would I want to get next to that God?"

I must confess, it is a struggle for me to live as a Christian in this culture and society. And it's not because I am persecuted, harassed, or think there is a war on Christmas. No, it is a struggle for me to live as a Christian in this culture and society because I can be extremely successful and comfortable without it, or with a co-opted version of it. As a pastor/friend of mine, Bob Hutson said recently, "I don't have trouble clinging to my faith in God when things are bad. I have the most trouble when things are going well. And I begin to believe 'I've got this.'"

You see, like Bob, I have learned to navigate this culture of reward and punishment, competition, and survival of the fittest, rather well.

And so, it's hard for me to live in this culture of competition and survival of the fittest, and still hear the words of St. Paul, "... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are..."

And yet, at some point in all of our lives, we will no longer be competitive, nor the fittest. At some point in our lives, whether through illness, addiction, divorce, death of a loved one, loss of job, pandemic, the list goes on and on... at some point in our lives, we will be brought to our knees. We will be made weak and brought low. And then the question becomes, which kingdom is there for you? Which kingdom will welcome you in and prepare a place at the feast for you?

My friend, Henry Rojas, likes to tell those in recovery that they are the light of the world. For they have

seen the kingdom of the world and its ways, and they know its crushing and suffocating nature. They have experienced it first hand and have suffered terribly. They have also experienced recovery by turning to the kingdom of a higher power. They have found life in an alternative community, an alternative kingdom. It has been said often by those in the recovery community, “More grace happens on Wednesday night in the church basement than on Sunday mornings in the sanctuary.”

And I can't help but think that is part of what has happened through this worldly pandemic. People are no longer interested in 'living to work'. They want to 'work to live'. People were forced to step away from the crushing madness of the world's systems, particularly the economic system, and they are in no rush to rejoin it the way it was. The younger generations took a step back from the kingdoms we have created ... and they took a good, long, look at them, and said, “No thanks.”

So many in the world are crying for a different kind of kingdom to be in their midst. One that doesn't require the stepping on another to be successful. Because, at some point in our lives, we all will be brought to our knees. And then the question becomes, which kingdom is there for you? Which kingdom will welcome you in and prepare a place at the feast for you?

So many in the world are crying for a different kind of kingdom to be in their midst. One that will be there for them in their times of weakness and low points. A kingdom of people who will see the Christ in the “least of these.” A kingdom that invites the lame, and orphaned, and widowed to its feast.

This is the kingdom that “dwells among us full of grace and truth.” This is the kingdom of Jesus. This is the kingdom which we encounter in this meal. Where a denier, betrayer, doubter and cowards are welcomed and fed.

The kingdom of Jesus, which is not FROM this world, but very much IN this world.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

You Lord Are In This Place

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in 1)...this place.
2)...my heart. 3)...my mind. 4)...my life.
Your presence fills it.
Your presence is peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Healer of Our Every Ill

(Marty Haugen)

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow. Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope
beyond our sorrow.

You who know our fears and sadness. Grace us with your peace and gladness.

Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain*

In the pain and joy beholding, how your grace is still unfolding

Give us all your vision God of love. *Refrain*

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Taize Reflections)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lukin)

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon
you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of
his countenance upon you. And give you peace....

