

A Little Pathetic

A Sermon Expositing John 18:33-37

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It was a bit pathetic actually. I'm not sure I realized it at the time and I certainly don't mean any offense to the sponsors (of which we, FBCR, were one), but there we were – maybe 40 or 50 of us. That's a hearty crowd in some places, but at the foot of the Rochester Liberty Pole, muted by the rush of traffic at the corner of East and Main and dwarfed by the size of the plaza there the gathering felt a bit anemic actually. Don't get me wrong, it was lovely. It was important. It was good that people were there, but as we all tried in vain to keep our vigil candles alight in the chilly Fall draft I couldn't help but wonder if this gathering had the power it needed to achieve its hope. Its hope – our hope – was to ensure that the lives, the names even, of transgender persons whose lives have been snuffed out in the last year were remembered. There is a hope beyond that of course – the creation of a society that is unafraid of difference, that trusts a person when their experience of life is not the same as dominant culture, that does not rely on violence, and recognizes that some violence is committed by word and deed as much as with weapons. The ultimate hope of Transgender Day of Remembrance, the solemnity we were holding in vigil last night, is to make space in the world for transgender persons; and on this occasion, to do so by calling out the names of those who have died this year. There were 47 names to read from among the statistically small subset of the American population – all murdered or having taken their own lives. That's more than last year with over a month to go and last year was a new record. Each name read gave testimony to the fact that trans people suffer profoundly higher rates of homicide and suicide, trans people of color suffer *even* higher rates, and those numbers are based upon cases we *know about* among a population much of the world still wants to remain invisible. It must stop, dear ones. That's what we were gathered to say last night, but I wondered if anyone was listening. *I* was having a hard enough time listening to the underpowered sound system against the thrumming and whirring and pattering of evening traffic. It was a lovely and important gathering, but I don't know how much power it had.

I have to admit it was kind of pathetic.

Everyone knows if we're going to change the world we're going to need robust, strong, coercive action and response to the ills of the world. The status quo cannot be allowed to stand and will have to be replaced with systems built on peace and justice. And what better day to talk about the inevitable, unstoppable initiation of new systems than Reign of Christ Sunday. Isn't that what we celebrate today – that Christ is the ultimate authority in the world and that his eventual rule is irresistible, so a day of peace and justice is surely coming?

You know, in a calendar full of sacred observances that come to us from millennia ago it may interest you to know that today's celebration comes to us from – 1925. Yep. Pope Pius XI added the date to the Christian calendar and the various ecumenical communions and conferences working together also adopted it and thus it worked its way into the Revised Common Lectionary, which is also used by most mainline protestant churches and even a few Baptists silly enough to follow along. In 1925 with the war to end all wars just seven years in the past the world was again full of dangerous ideas spreading quickly. Pope Pius was particularly concerned about the rise of Nazism, Fascism, and Nationalism. With so many frightening ideas

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

beginning to take hold and so many nation states trying them on, he thought it would be a good time to remind people of faith that there is only one true authority in the world and that is the eternal Christ. And so he wrote an encyclical, a kind of letter, and within it he spelled out the reasons for and commissioned *The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe!* Not bad huh?

Well, if you're not a fan of what theologians call the "meticulous" view of God's sovereignty maybe not great. Or for that matter if you're not a fan of God portrayed as hyper-masculine, the "king" thing might not be great. Or if you're not a fan of monarchy as a metaphor for...you know what, his point was that a good and benevolent God is in charge and anyone who stands in the way of Christ's reign will suffer the consequences and that's a good thing, right!? Right!?

Well, I don't know if Pope Pius did it or if someone else comes along later and prescribes the readings for these solemnities, but whoever did that didn't pick the best gospel lesson to show off Christ's irresistible, cosmic sovereignty. It's a complicated reading that Jack gave us a moment ago. Let's just say this up front. You've heard, I'm sure, that this is a text about how the big bad Jews manipulated an otherwise sympathetic Roman Governor into putting Jesus to death for blasphemy. It isn't. That's a surface level reading shaded by misunderstandings of both Judaism and the way that empires function in the world. It is rather, a look at a moment of *very* careful diplomacy between the ruling elite in Jerusalem and the Governor appointed by the Emperor to keep their people in subjugation. While Rome's military was vast and mighty, it was not sufficient to subdue all the world by force. Rather, in order to keep the tribute coming from the conquered and co-opted they often allowed them to rule themselves within certain bounds. For Rome, Judea was both allied *and* subjugated, and Pilate had the unenviable task of maintaining that precarious status quo. A low-status Galilean teacher whose ideas bucked tradition and were growing in popularity and who had been called "Emperor" or "King" on multiple occasions was a threat to that careful balance.

That's how the fireworks started – when two local rulers locked in a careful geopolitical reality picked a fight with the one Pope Pius called the King of the Universe. You know how that goes down, don't you? It involves the divine empowerment of armed disciples, targeted lightning strikes, and the descending of angels of destruction. Wait, what page were we on? I can't find the angels of destruction now.

The lection, the story that Pope Pius used to solidify his view of a cosmically powerful Christ plays out differently than we might think. First, Christ allows himself to be put on trial by earthly rulers. Before the trial started he told the one follower who rose up to protect him to put his sword away. Eventually we know the trial will result in his death and in the meantime when he's asked whether or not he is a King he says, "no?" or maybe "yeah, but not like you're thinking" or something. It's hard to really pinpoint exactly what he thinks about his own Kingship even in the original language! The King of the Universe is caught up in the middle of a political struggle and is so flustered by it all he can't seem to even mount an intelligible argument much less a defense of his person. Honestly, it's kind of pathetic. At least it looks that way.

Pretend for a moment that you don't know this person on trial is Jesus. Set your religious fervor aside for a second and look objectively. The character in the story is not the vision of a hero we usually look for. He's vulnerable, he's imprecise, he's not commanding, and we know already that he'll die in part because of this exchange. But there is one thing he says that reverberates like thunder through faith history. "If my Kingdom were of this world my followers would be fighting for me." He stops shy of taking the mantle of "King," but points out that whatever this thing he is after is – whether it be a Kingdom or a new social order or whatever – it does not rely on violence to get what it wants. It is non-coercive.

That's what is so important about this whole story. Jesus stood between two worldly powers knowing their ultimate authority was vested only in their ability to take away life. Their power was ultimately only violence and he couldn't be coerced into participating. The King of the Universe derives his power not from coercive, irresistible power, but from being pathetic. That is to say that Jesus, in his earthly life, never cared to have scores and scores of followers. He didn't travel with security. He didn't pull together a militia or arm himself or encourage any kind of political violence and even so – his ideas, his hope caught on. *That* is the

greatest threat to the status quo the world has ever known – the power of a person to be uncoerced and uncoercive. You'll know that when you see it in the world, because at first glance it look kind of pathetic.

It looks sometimes like a group of people thinking they can change the world by coming together once a week to sing some songs and pray some prayers together. It looks a bit like a preacher who called the masses together to march on Washington peacefully in pursuit of justice. It even looks a bit like a few folks gathered to try to light candles in the wind on a cold street corner, because for some reason reading of the names of transgender folx seems like a revolutionary thing to do. You'll know the Kingdom of God when you see it in the world, because it doesn't look flashy or particularly powerful. You'll know the Reign of Christ in the world, because it *looks* a little pathetic.

Amen.