

**Revelation 1: 4-8**  
**John 18: 28-38**  
**November 24, 2012**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**Christ the King Sunday**

Twenty-eight years ago, MJ and I interviewed for a co-pastoral position for two African American churches in Boston. During the interview we were asked this question: “Do your parishioners follow you because you are pastors or do they follow you because they trust your leadership?” This perceptive question lies at the heart of what does and does *not* constitute effective leadership and what is the essential trait of true authority.

I begin this way because today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is the day when we lift up that dimension of Jesus by which he commands our obedience and trust. It is the Sunday when we confess that Jesus is Lord all life but also the Lord of our individual lives.

When John wrote his Gospel the world was ruled by emperors and kings who claimed to be a god on earth and who imposed their will upon people by force. Those who were loyal and obedient received certain privileges. Those who rebelled were exiled or killed. For the vast majority of the ruled the desire was simply to be left alone by the king and his representatives. Very few if any people followed the king or emperor out of sincere belief and devotion.

Thus when John records Jesus’ appearance before Pontius Pilate, the governor is confused. Jesus’ accusers claim he is a dangerous rival to the Roman emperor. Pilate, who like any governor of the empire, has a network of spies and soldiers has no evidence of this claim. He is further confused by Jesus’ reply to his attempt to find out if Jesus

thinks he is a king. “My kingdom is not *of* this world. If it were of this world, my followers would have fought to prevent me from being arrested. But as it is, my kingdom is not *from* this world.” By the end of his interrogation all Pilate can do is throw up his hands and ask “What is truth?”

I propose to you that this encounter between Jesus and Pilate is about Jesus’ claim of authority. He clearly is no political threat to Pilate or to Rome—at least not at this point. Yet his teachings and actions are creating a disturbance among the majority population in Palestine, the Jewish people. Pilate may not understand what the controversy is between Jesus and many of his fellow Jews. But he does understand authority and the social order preserved by obeying authority. In the end he will condemn Jesus to death not because he believes Jesus himself is dangerous; but because he is the center of a disturbance, which could pose a serious threat to the order of Roman rule in Palestine.

What sort of king *is* Jesus? We get at this question by first by identifying what sort of king he is *not*. Jesus is clearly *not* a king whose power depends on political and military power. It is, to use his words, *not of this world*.” Jesus does not claim political and military authority. He does not seek worldly power. He is not out to create a new and just society by imposing justice upon an unruly human community. Nor does he seek to make use of worldly means of power in order to achieve morally laudable goals.

Having dismissed these reasons what remains? In worldly terms nothing; in spiritual terms, much. What is left to rule if not the outward behavior of a person? It is everything that makes a person human. It is the invisible yet essential dimension of what theologians and philosophers have called the “soul.” The soul is our God dimension. The

soul is what connects us to God and which inspires God-in-us to reveal God to the world. It is the soul which is the source of our spiritual life. When it is animated by faith through the Holy Spirit it becomes an inner gyroscope which guides us through the confusion and conflicts of life.

In addition to the soul we have the capacity to make choices in life. Theologians and philosophers argue incessantly over whether what we call our “will” is free or not. Personally I believe both sides are right. There is no doubt that we make choices every day. Some are conscious, some are unconscious and some are automatic out of habit. Yet how often do we look back on times where we made difficult choices and realize there was a larger invisible guiding hand involved?

I propose that when we have no awareness of a power greater than ourselves we may have the illusion of making choices; but in fact we are being governed by the forces of worldly desires and our need for protection and security. When we react to people and situations out of fear and anger are we really acting out of free will? Someone observed, “What angers you controls you.” How true. The same can be said of the things that frighten us and worry us.

When we claim Jesus as Lord we renounce our absolute right to do and will whatever we want. When we claim Jesus as Lord we renounce all loyalties that compete with his will in our lives. When we accept Jesus as Lord we give up our demand that life go a certain way and await his direction. From the moment we make following Jesus as Lord and King of our lives our deepest prayer echoes Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will but thine be done.”

Millions upon millions of believers over the centuries report that when they surrender their life and wills to Jesus as King they experience a peace that goes beyond anything the world offers. It is a peace which the world can neither give nor take away. We stop striving after unreachable goals. We stop trying to be people we are not. We stop having unrealistic expectations of our lives and the lives of those around us. We discover a miracle: we are wonderful creations of God right here right now as who we are. When we stop trying to make it in this world and seek to abide in the realm where Christ is King we discover there is a place for us, uniquely created for us by God.

But here is the most important truth about Jesus as King. He will never force us to believe in him. Jesus will never make us love him and follow him. Christ our King isn't interested in making clones of himself. He wants us to come to him freely and offer our lives and our trust to him. It is this very freedom, tender and vulnerable that makes Jesus a different sort of King. The only power he claims is love. The only response he wants from us is love. In truth this love is the most precious treasure in the world because it is not from the world or of the world. It is from heaven. Yet, because Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead, it is a power that seeks to rule in this world as it does in heaven. Friends the love of Jesus our Lord must rule in us first. It must walk in us much more than our talk. As this happens, the love of Jesus cannot but spread out into the world. Amen.