

“The Kingdom of Jesus” based on John 18:28-28a and Psalm 146

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 27, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

On October 31, 1517, a German monk and college professor named Martin Luther had some questions. His concern was the system of indulgences, as it was practiced in the church then. Now, to be clear, indulgences were not believed to be tickets into heaven. No, for an indulgence to “work” you had to already be heaven bound, through faithful observance of the sacraments in the church.

Indulgences, rather, were like the express lane at a theme park. The indulgence either earned you a place in front of the line, or bought you a place farther up, skipping to the front of the line known as purgatory.

In Luther’s 95 theses, he makes a case against indulgences, not by tearing down the faith of the church, but in showing based on church teaching, that the indulgences, and in particular the sale of indulgences to fund projects such as the Sistine Chapel, was incongruent and inconsistent with the rest of Christian teaching.

Theses 81 and 82 are my favorites and make his point most clearly: “[81] *This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult even for learned men to rescue the reverence which is due the pope from slander or from the shrewd questions of the laity.* [82] *Such as: “Why doesn’t the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?” The former reason would be most just; the latter is most trivial.*”

For Luther, his aim was not to destroy the church, but to bring reform and repair it, by making the church’s teachings and actions line up with each other and scripture. In fact, the beauty of most of the first- and second-generation reformers is that their aim was not to create a new church by dividing it but restore the catholic church.

Unfortunately, the reformers themselves could not align. The limits of our human nature only divided the church even more. First it divided into theological movements with the first being Lutheran, Reformed. Then it divided into national and ethnic churches – German, Swedish, Dutch, French, English – and again, it divided then along doctrinal lines.

The result is the fractured church we see in our modern world today. Where Jesus prayed to the Father – “so they may be one as we are one” – in this post-Reformation landscape, it sometimes feels like we actively work against this. Forget reunion for a reformed Catholic church as Luther first sought, we would be fortunate if denominations stopped splintering. Every denomination begins as a non-denominational church, claiming to be the church that rightly holds the “truth.”

So, then the question from Pilate to Jesus might better be asked of us in the collective church: “What is truth?” Long before relativism was defined as a philosophical question, we see Pilate on to it. You see, relativism, or the idea that there is no universal truth, that truth is relative to the perspective of the observer, or our context is what Pilate points to. In other words, what is true, what is right or wrong, all standards, are up to us to decide in every context, by every individual, and in consideration most of all of whomever is in power at what time. If we subscribe to this, then Pilate is right: “What is truth?”

It is too easy for us as humans to be divided within ourselves. We resist the idea that we need to be reformed. We justify whatever it is we want to hold on to. The church at the time of the Reformation held a tenuous grip on Western Europe. The church held back forces of violent bloodshed and immense power struggles.

The sheer authority of the pope to excommunicate and illegitimize rulers, was, in some cases, the only thing preventing huge power struggles, between rival families and rival ethnic groups across Europe. Once the church divided, all those wars broke out, and it is a mistake to consider them wars of religion. There were a lot of factors.

Any reform in that time that undermined the authority of the person holding the title of pope, threatened to undermine the peace of Europe, so the faithful justified abuses of power. These ranged from the inability of popes to keep their vows such as celibacy to their failure to even practice the faith, as some supposedly seemed to not even believe in God. This led up to the sale of indulgences that funded the artistic interests of the leaders.

But what always becomes clear, soon became clear to them then: You cannot defend your “values” by violating your “values.” When you do this, your values change and disappear. You become something different, often resembling the very thing you once opposed.

You see, the church grew in its early years by holding to its values, even to death. Yes, there were those who compromised. Yes, there were heresies that sought to divide, but on the whole in its earliest days, the faith grew only with the power of persuasion and prayer. The Christian population of the Roman Empire grew organically even as many went to their death simply in the hope of the resurrection and in the death of the martyrs the church grew. You see, for them, when asked the question: “What is truth?” Their answer was simple: Jesus is Lord.

But once Christianity gained favor in the empire, this answer was challenged. After all, in different parts of the empire, Christians had different practices. What’s more: in the rise out of persecution, even Jesus himself was being questioned. There was this guy Arius, a rogue bishop, who pushed ideas that the halls of power really appreciated.

Arianism was popular among Roman emperors because he said Jesus is not equal to God but made by God to rule creation. By this logic, the rulers thought that maybe Jesus made emperors to rule the empire? If God made one Jesus out of God’s own attributes, then Jesus might select one person to rule for him, like a god in authority over the empire.

But much to the chagrin of Constantine, who had even commissioned statues of himself as a god, in a council that he called to settle the issue, church leaders from across the empire came together, discussed the matter, kicked out Arius and his handful of followers and then declared a unanimous vote for a co-equal trinity in God, without hierarchy, equal in substance, and yet a community of persons.

How we view God matters in how we approach the world, and how we live in it. If we view God as an authoritarian, then we are prone to condone authoritarianism. If we truly view God as a Trinity, a community bound by one essence and one will, then we are free to be a community in our diversity, bound by Jesus.

This is at the heart of John's gospel, which we read from today. Earlier in his gospel, in Chapter 1, verse 14, John famously writes: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Notice the end – full of grace and truth. Often these get pitted against each other, as if we have to balance grace with truth because these are in opposition to each other. Truth gets framed as the hard specific doctrines, the very ones that often split the church. Grace is then seen as forgiveness, the means for reconciliation to reunited the church.

Beloved, that is not the doctrine that John is presenting here. The word "full" here does not present Jesus as a container where we put some grace in and then some truth to fill it up. That is not the picture. Rather, it describes all that he is made of. For John, Jesus is grace and Jesus is truth, just as Jesus is human and Jesus is God. There is no container and there is no math here. Jesus is fully both.

Jesus is the gift of God that humanity did not earn, but which God gave out of love. Jesus says in John's gospel, "For God so loved the world, that he sent his Son, his only begotten son (or one and only Son) so that all who believe in him, shall not perish but will have eternal life (or life in the age to come)."

Grace then is the Word of God, fully one with God, sent to share in our humanity to lead us on the way to eternal life. John says "truth and grace" came through Jesus, the only begotten God who reveals the father. And so, later in John it makes sense when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through me." Jesus, being fully God, is the truth, revealing who God is, and leading us to God.

Again, this is not a math problem. We don't add 100 percent and 100 percent here. Jesus being fully God and fully human means God humbly became human in him. The eternal Son, fully one with the Father and the Spirit, shared in our flesh. This incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God in our humanity is the grace of Jesus, the gift which we did nothing to earn. It is a gift which reveals the truth of who God is in God's love for us, each and every one of us. This love comes from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit pouring love into our hearts.

We need to do more to reflect this love in our lives. This places Jesus as our mediator, our high priest, one with us, and one with God, revealing God in truth.

Jesus says to Pilate, "You say that I am a king, for this I was born, and for this I came into the world: so that I may bear witness to the truth everyone who is from the truth, (everyone who belongs to the truth) listens to my voice."

On this Reformation Sunday, in the midst of a highly visible and contested election year, we would do well to heed the lessons of the Reformation and the early church, while also recognizing that there is only one Kingdom or nation that matters.

Be wary of those who would compromise their values, in order to achieve victory for those values in the public arena. The church sought power and wealth and justified it, even as it compromised the faith it espoused, requiring the reformation we celebrate today. But in truth, that reformation too, is in constant need of reformation.

Be wary of claims that Christianity needs power and wealth. The Kingdom of Jesus is not “of this world,” or more accurately with the Greek word “ek,” it means “from this world.” If it were, Jesus said, then his servants or his officials would fight, or struggle, to prevent his arrest in the first place. But his kingdom is not from here. No, Jesus’s kingdom is from his place in the Godhead. It is not dependent on earthly power or worldly tactics.

At a word, Jesus could have snapped his fingers and Pilate would have dropped dead. At a word, angels could have come down and wiped out the Roman legions. But he does not compromise his truth to protect himself.

My sisters and brothers, faithful Christians will vote in many ways this week and through Nov. 5th. Anyone who tells you there is a litmus test for how a true Christian must vote, is either lying to gain something from you or has sadly been the victim of a lie. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus said as he went to his death. It was a shameful death in the world’s eyes, on a Roman cross, but a cross which he describes as his throne, where he is lifted up so that all might believe in him.

No candidate is God’s candidate, nor is any candidate for any office above reproach. As the Psalmist wrote, “Do not put your trust in nobles, nor in a child of Adam, where there is no salvation. When their breath departs, they return to their dirt, and on that day, their thoughts perish.”

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father, except through him. He is way by which we are united with God by grace, to share in God’s eternal life. He is our support and the only litmus test of our Christianity – Do you truly submit to Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Jesus is the embodiment of Jacob’s God and of Jacob’s descendants, Israel. He is fully God and fully human, our mediator and the Lord. How we view God matters.

The Psalmist is right again: “Indeed, Happy is the one who has the God of Jacob as support, whose hope is the Lord their God, who made the heavens, the land, the sea, and all that is in them, who watches over the truth always, who judges for the oppressed, who gives bread to the hungry. The Lord gives freedom to the imprisoned. The Lord opens the eyes of those who are blind. The Lord raises those who are bent over. The Lord loves the just. The Lord watches over the sojourner (the migrant or foreigner) and embraces those who are orphaned and widowed. But the Lord turns the path of the wicked upside down.”

Beloved, this is the challenge we face in our voting and how we conduct ourselves. Up and down every ballot, from President to the infamous dog catcher I’ve never actually seen on a ballot, there are valid reasons to support every single candidate listed. But there are also zero reasons to be undyingly loyal to any candidate.

If we claim the mantle of Christians, the challenge then becomes this: We must make the best choice we can based on our Christian values and sensibilities. We must accept that another equally faithful Christian may vote differently. We also must hold whomever we elect to be accountable, recognizing that we cannot defend our values, by compromising our values.

Neither Christ, nor Christianity, need the power of this world nor any nation – not even the U.S. I love the line in the song, “Kingdom of Jesus” by the Porter’s Gate, which Bruce and Sherry sang to day. It says “his kingdom is not of this world or of any, whose ruler’s face is on a penny.” There is a

double meaning here of not only Abraham Lincoln, but the original King James Translation in Luke's gospel when Jesus asks for a coin with Caesar's image and says, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's." It's funny how we've copied Rome.

Christ does not need us to raise up arms on his behalf. He did not arm Judea then, nor did he fight Pilate, because his Kingdom is not from this world. How often do we pray – Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We need to be true to that because his kingdom is not from this world, so for his kingdom to come, it will not require us to make a kingdom of this world to go up to heaven. No, look at what the prayer says: forgive as we are forgiven, trust in God's provision of daily bread.

God does not need us. I've emphasized this time and time again. God does not need us but loves us and wants us to turn to the loving embrace seen in Jesus's outstretched arms on the cross. This is his throne. This is the throne of God. Paul said that in our weakness, we are strong, because God's grace is sufficient. Jesus stood up to Pilate, laying down his life for us and our salvation. God chose the small in Israel to outlast the great empires. Do you know of anyone who claims to be Assyrian or Babylonian? No, but we've all known people who are Jewish. It's amazing how that nation has survived, even though they are small in number, never great. God chooses us the small – you and me, all of us – to make the simple choices each day to love, by imitating Christ and not the ways of this world.

By all means, get out there and vote, but remember the challenge of Christian faith: Our loyalty must not be to any political position, any candidate, or even to our country. The only true loyalty or undying loyalty we should have is our allegiance to the Kingdom of Jesus. That's what it means to be a Christian. That's the challenge of faith. It's not easy, but our allegiance must be to the Kingdom of Jesus.

God does not need you for anything, but loves you, and wants your love, calling all of us to follow Jesus, remembering his words to "take up your cross and come follow me." Amen.

Psalm 146:

Praise the Lord, in my whole being, praise the Lord.

I will praise the Lord while I live. I will still sing praises to my God.

Do not put trust in nobles,

nor in a child of Adam in whom there is no salvation.

When their breath departs, they return to their dirt,
and on that day their thoughts perish.

Happy is the one who has the God of Jacob for his support,

whose hope is the Lord their God,

who made the heavens, the land, the sea, and all that is in them,

who watches over the truth always,

who judges for the oppressed,

who gives bread to the hungry.

The Lord gives freedom to the imprisoned.

The Lord opens the eyes of those who are blind.

The Lord raises those who are bent over.

The Lord loves the just.

The Lord watches over the sojourner,

And embraces those who are orphaned and widowed.

But the Lord turns the path of the wicked upside down.

The Lord shall reign forever – your God, Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord.

John 18:28-38a

Then the council of Judean leaders sent Jesus away from Caiaphas into the Praetorium. It was now early in the morning, and they had not entered into the Praetorium, so that they should not be made unclean and could eat the Passover meal. At this point, Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, saying to him, "If he were not doing evil, we would not have surrendered him to you."

So then Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your laws." The Judeans said to him, "For us, it is not permitted to put someone to death." This was in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he had spoken, signifying what death he was about to die.

Upon this, Pilate entered into the Praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the king of the Judeans?"

Jesus answered, "Do you say this from yourself, or did others say it about me?"

Pilate answered, "I am not a Judean. Your nation and the chief priests surrendered you to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from out of this world. If my kingdom were from out of this world, my officers would struggle, so that I might not be betrayed by the Judeans. But now my kingdom is not from this place."

Upon this, Pilate said to him, "Then, you are a king?"

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, so that I may bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is from the truth hears my voice."

Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"