

Being re-membered
John 18:33–37

“Are you king?” Pilate asks Jesus. The exchange between Jesus and Pilate is...interesting. It’s pretty clear that the questions Pilate is asking and the one Jesus is answering are two different questions. Their questions and answers are going back and forth as if they’re in two different conversations.

Pilate is representing empire. He’s a representative of the occupation. His dimension, his conversation is about power over: “What power do you have, Jesus? Do you have the power to topple the Roman occupation? Are you a threat to *my* power?” This is the conversation Pilate is having.

And Jesus, as usual, isn’t giving any straight answers. The answers likely felt evasive to Pilate. You can imagine the chatter in Pilate’s head, “Why can’t the man just say Yes or No, for heaven’s sake?”

But we’ve been with Jesus long enough to know that he’s not avoiding the questions so much as turning the assumptions *under* the questions on their head. With his responses, Jesus is completely subverting the assumptions of what it means to be a king. Of what the Reign of God, or the Reign of Christ looks like. We know Jesus well enough to know that that’s what he’s doing. But I’m not sure that I know Jesus well enough to *really* understand what he means.

I have a sense of what the Kingdom of God is...but it’s elusive. What does it mean on Monday morning that we live in the Reign of Christ? How do I know that I’m living in Christ’s Reign? And not in empire’s reign? It’s hard to know the Kingdom of God isn’t a territory with physical geography in the same way that the kingdom of the United States has physical territory.

So how do we know if we, in the dailiness of our lives, are living in the Reign of Christ? Am I part of God's Kingdom because of what I believe? Or because of a decision I made at some point in time to follow Jesus? Is it because I'm part of the church and live a morally upright life? What does it mean to live in God's Kingdom? Christians around the world, living all kinds of lives, believing all kinds of things claim to be living in the Reign of Christ. But what about us? Here? Now? This morning? Individually and collectively? What does this conversation between Jesus and Pilate have to do with me on Monday morning or Friday night? What does it have to do with us as Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church? To this beloved community in conflict?

“Are you king?”

Jesus doesn't answer Yes or No. As usual, into a false choice between two opposites, Jesus makes three: “My kingdom is not from this world.” Said another way, Yes, I am king and No, I am not a king like any king you know.”

“My kingdom is not from this world.” And yet, we know that it *is* a kingdom on earth. Jesus had and still has followers here on earth. It's a kingdom *in* this world. But it isn't *from* this world.

If you're getting lost in this abstract location of the Kingdom, you're not alone!

But then in his next sentence, Jesus speaks with sharp clarity, making an absolute distinction between Jesus' Kingdom and the kingdom of empire. Listen again: “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to my accusers. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

I don't know about you but these two sentences stopped me in my tracks. Jesus is marking the geography of God's Kingdom. And it's as clear as day. The boundaries of the Reign of Christ are marked by *not* fighting. In the kingdoms of the world, people will fight to

defend their king. In God's Kingdom, people will not fight to defend their King. In the kingdoms of empire, people compete for power and position. And when their power is threatened, or when they *fear* their power might be threatened, they fight to defend themselves, to protect and hold onto the power they have. In the Reign of Christ, Jesus' followers will *not* fight to defend him. Not only that, Jesus won't even defend himself! Jesus won't and he doesn't defend himself.

Why? Why not? I understand not fighting. I understand saying No to physical violence. But how is it that Jesus had no expectation that his followers defend him? And why, why on earth didn't he defend himself? How could he be defenseless? How is it possible that Jesus didn't give in to the very human impulse to defend himself?

Jesus is so very clear that his Kingdom is characterized by *not* fighting, by *not* defending. I think this week is the first time I've heard Jesus say this. But it left me puzzled. Of all the ways to describe the Kingdom of God, why...or how...is *not* fighting a sign of Christ's Reign?

And then my heart jumped: Followers of Jesus weren't fighting for him because they weren't threatened. Jesus didn't need to defend himself because he wasn't threatened. People fight when threatened or when they *feel* threatened. And followers of Jesus aren't threatened because they know themselves *beloved*. Their deepest, their truest, their first identity is *beloved of God*.

Jesus knows himself as *God's beloved*, no matter what, no matter when, no matter where. In ever circumstance, in any circumstance, Jesus is absolutely grounded and held in his belovedness. It's an unshakeable and indestructible identity. An identity and a being that cannot be threatened. Because when we know ourselves beloved, when *that is who we are*, then we are *in the heart of God*.

And in the heart of God is the whole of humanity. Which means that from within the heart of God, Jesus not only knew himself beloved, but he knew Pilate as beloved. He knew his accusers as beloved. Within the heart of God's love—a heart more generous, more gracious, more giving and forgiving than we can begin to imagine—within the heart of God, we are at home. And we are safe.

This's what happened to people when they encountered Jesus. Jesus looked at each person he met. He saw them as human beings. He recognized them as God's beloved. And in one encounter after another, wounds were healed. Lifetimes of wounds and brokenness and pain were touched and healed. Not because Jesus had a magic touch but by the magical power of God's love. When we know ourselves loved, when we're in the heart of God, we're home. That is who we are. Who we are, every one of us, is first and foremost, beloved of God. And God's love has the power—the magic—to heal and transform the oldest wounds, the deepest pain, the most shattered relationships. Even the complicated conflict within Fellowship of Hope.

When we encounter Jesus, when we find ourselves at home in the heart of God's love, we are free to release all the ways our empire-formed identities bind and cripple and blind us. When I live in my empire-formed identity, I am easily insecure and threatened by people and events around me. I'm insecure because I don't think I'm good enough, so I have to pretend that I am. I don't think I'm loveable so I try to earn and prove my value. My empire identity keeps telling me my shame is too ugly and too great so I try to hide it. My empire-based identity is so fragile, and so terribly vulnerable.

But our identity as God's beloved is sturdy, unbreakable, absolute.

Beloved, you are God's. That is who you are, originally and eternally. On this Reign of Christ Sunday, the Spirit of God is coming to us...as individuals and as a

community...inviting us to bring ourselves, our empire identities, and our congregational conflict into the Reign of Christ. The Spirit of God is inviting us to bring our anxieties, our fears, our vulnerabilities into the Reign of Christ. God's Holy Spirit is inviting us to bring our impulses and desires to fight and defend ourselves into the Reign of Christ. Because we are human, our empire identities will always be tempting us to fight and defend ourselves. And when that urge to fight rises up, by the power of God's Spirit we can choose to step into the Reign of Christ. Because within the Reign of the Crucified/Resurrected Christ, the re-membering and transforming power of God's love works its magic.

May we give ourselves to God's Spirit, letting the Holy Spirit return us home, into the heart of God, where we are eternally safe.

May we give ourselves, our urges and impulses to fight and defend ourselves, to the Reign of the Crucified/Resurrected Christ.

And may we, together, practice living into our identities as beloved of God, seeing ourselves and each other and all others, as God's beloved.

May it be so.