

Michael Gehring
“Christ the King”
John 18: 33-37
Main Street UMC, Kernersville, NC
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Barbara Lundblad told a story about one of her colleagues at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan, the theologian Delores Williams. Delores who grew up in the South remembered Sunday mornings as a child. “...when the minister shouted out: *“Who is Jesus?”* The choir responded in voices loud and strong: *“King of kings and Lord Almighty!”* Then little Miss Huff, in a voice so fragile and soft you could hardly hear, would sing her own answer, *“Poor little Mary’s boy.”* Back and forth they sang – *“KING OF KINGS” ... “Poor little Mary’s boy.”* Delores said, *“It was the African American church doing theology, ‘Who is Jesus?’ ‘King of Kings’ cannot be the answer without seeing ‘poor little Mary’s boy.’”*

In this coming week, we will hold this tension in our hearts. Today is the last Sunday of the Church year. Next Sunday begins a new year with the first Sunday of Advent. In the span of seven days, we move from celebrating the triumphant king of kings to the beginning of the season in which we prepare our hearts to meet the babe in the manger.

In the Gospel Lesson read this morning, it’s Good Friday morning; perhaps more accurate to call it Good and Tragic Friday. Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, and Pilate asked him, *“Are you the King of the Jews?”* Jesus answered, *“Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”* Pilate replied, *“I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priest have handed you over to me. What have you done?”*

Pilate, of course, was right. Pilate was a Roman. Jesus was a Jew. Pilate belonged to the conquerors. Jesus belonged to the conquered. Pilate was a wealthy aristocrat. Jesus was a commoner. Pilate was the Roman Governor of Judea. Jesus was a wandering religious teacher. Pilate was extremely powerful. He had 3000 troops at his disposal and he held the power of life and death in his hands. Jesus had twelve apostles who all abandoned him. Pilate stood regally enthroned, the chief representative of Caesar in that land. Jesus stood there alone and bound.

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.”* 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.”*

The irony is that Pilate would be forgotten from human history if it were not for his order of the execution of poor little Mary's boy, this wandering religious leader. Did you know that some biblical scholars a century or two back doubted the existence of Pontius Pilate? They thought the Gospel writers made him up. Then in 1961, an archaeologist discovered in Caesarea a stone that had Pilate's name and title chiseled into it. The most powerful man in Palestine almost would have been forgotten to the dust bin of history if it were not for that man who stood before him that day, powerless in the world's eyes.

One difficult lesson for us to learn is that power fades, and power is elusive for everyone except God. In death, Jesus became more powerful than Pilate could ever imagine. Power is indeed mysterious, and it is instructive to remember how Jesus taught us to exercise power—to hold it lightly, to not covet it; to use a Tolkien image to not let it become the ring, *“my precious my precious.”* Power is only a tool to make this world better, and to faithfully serve our Lord of Lords. Power, for the Christian, is never an end in itself. As Jesus taught, in Mark 10:42: *“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers’ lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.”*

The temptation that power brings is to forget about our dependency on God—that is also the temptation of wealth. And it is amazing to me how many people think they can be kings of their own lives. They crown themselves as rulers of their own lives, and they refuse to submit to God's purposes and God's claims.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are reminded of a kingdom and a king not from this world who holds claims upon our lives and souls. We are reminded that our ultimate dignity and worth is not found in the size of our bank accounts, in our nationality, in our political connections, or in the scope of our influence. Our ultimate dignity and worth are found in our status as children of God. And how sad it is that there are people all around us living their lives without submitting them to God.

Some years back I received in the mail an obituary of someone I have known pretty much the entirety of my life. It was of someone who was brilliant and who could have accomplished so much in life. He was a talented artist and inventor. I called up the person who sent me the obituary and we were talked about his life—talked about some of the issues in his life, his struggles and unrealized dreams. What I kept saying to her was how sad that he never belonged to a church. When he died there was no community of faith to gather around him, to pronounce a blessing upon his earthly life, and to commend him to the eternal kingdom of God. There was

none of that because he didn't believe. He wanted to be remembered and so he wrote his own obituary. He left money and instructions behind on where to have it published. In it he wrote about his war service, and about traveling to faraway places, the Orient, the Middle-East, and flying planes in North Africa. He talked about his adventures and all the things he thought that made up a full life. But what he didn't talk about and couldn't talk about was a community of faith, because he didn't belong to one. In his mind, there were no other kingdom claims upon his life other than that of being a citizen of the United States. When I read his obituary, I wanted to weep for his loss. The claim of Christ upon our lives makes all the difference.

The writer Frederick Buechner grew up in an unchurched family. After graduating from Princeton University and teaching at Lawrenceville prep, he published his first novel, *A Long Day's Dying* to wide acclaim. He was hailed as one of America's rising literary talents compared to Henry James. In 1952, he published his second novel and it was regarded as a flop. He was lecturing at New York University when he started attending church regularly for the first time in his life; primarily because he said he had nothing else to do on Sunday mornings. It was on one of those Sunday mornings in Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church during a sermon by George Buttrick when Buechner's conversion began in earnest. It was during the time of the coronation of Elizabeth as Queen of England. One phrase particularly impacted Buechner and knocked down the walls of his soul, capturing him for Christ. Buttrick said "*Jesus Christ refused the crown that Satan offered him in the wilderness, but he is king nonetheless because again and again he is crowned in the heart of the people who believe in him. And that inward coronation takes place, 'among confession, and tears and great laughter.'*"

May that be our prayer: that on this Christ the King Sunday, and on all the Sundays and days to follow—that we will crown him, again and again in our hearts as our Lord.