

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year B, Reign of Christ
November 24, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

What little my husband and I know about parenting we essentially learned off the internet. For example, we discovered that anytime you search for something online along the lines of ‘size 8 children’s mittens’ or ‘hot wheels’ or ‘when will Moana 2 be released’, the internet’s generous and kindly algorithm does its thing, and suddenly your social media and advertisement feeds are full of helpful parenting tips, from lunch box design to easy crockpot dinners—no gendered edges to the ‘suggestions’ at all (wink). In the middle of all the social media suggestions on how to parent, I stumbled across a reel—a quick video—which surfaced in my feed, focusing on bullying among children and how to address it from a human behavior and communications standpoint.¹

The suggestion from a professor of communications was that bullying relies on a script—that a bully makes an accusation or presumed statement of opinion which relies on two things: them having power; and their statement being truthful. So, if a bully came up to you and said, “You kind of smell” or “Your hair is terrible” or “No one likes you”, the clip suggested offering a neutral statement in return.

If someone were to say, ‘No one likes you’, our instinctive response might be, ‘Well, no one likes you either’, and storming away. That response would be affirming the power the bully wishes to claim from you and others. The suggestion the professor offered was a) to not walk away, or b) get defensive, but to instead offer in response a neutral message which wasn’t grounded in claiming dominance: “No one likes you” could be responded to with ‘Nope’; ‘Pass’; and my personal favorite suggestion, ‘Pancakes’. You reject the message AND refuse to offer the bully power—which they can claim all they want, but remember that power can only be given by another person. As this expert explained, you come up with a response that doesn’t agree with what they said, doesn’t afford them power, and has almost no power in itself, except to you. The bully will have no idea what to do with the new script that you have offered, because it isn’t rooted in the tussle for power, and it doesn’t offer a provocation they can jump on.

¹ <https://www.tiktok.com/@the.communication.expert/video/7271441709689621802> This is from Jaime Hamilton, who is known as The Communication Expert, and a former professor at Perdue University. I commend a number of her reels or short videos (they can be found on Facebook or Instagram as well, I bet) to you—here is another one which could have been applied to Jesus’ response to Pilate: <https://www.tiktok.com/@the.communication.expert/video/7335291625788181803>

You have no friends. Pass. You are annoying. Nope. You are irrelevant and no one likes you. Pancakes.

Keeping that in one hand, consider for a moment your image of the kingdom of God.

Five dollars says at least some of you thought of Cinderella's castle at Disney, or some fortress in Europe. You aren't wrong. Our image is nearly always of a kingdom with fortifications, primed for offense and defense, demarcating the territory over which it holds power. Oppressive or benign, power is still power and the impact of seeing a castle or fortification is meant to evoke exactly that response—awe, in both the wonder and terror forms of it. It is meant to make you think to yourself, I would not care to be the persona non grata of that ruler, or, conversely, let's hop on the coattails of that group, and we can mark ourselves safe from whatever is lurking in a threatening manner beyond the gates.

It is hard to separate our geopolitical frameworks of kingdoms from our image of God's kingdom. Somewhere in our minds, we are comfortable with the notion that aligning with power is the key to survival; that to survive, there are winners and losers and depending on the power of the kingdom, or numbers of red and blue on the map of votes, that seals our fate for good.

In our Sunday lectionary readings to this point, Jesus has been telling his followers not about the glory of fortifications, but about how they will ultimately fail us; that they are temporary. He upends everything which his disciples have come to rely on as institutions not just of power, but of reliability. The primacy of the first two commandments to love God and love neighbor over all other commandments²; the elevation of the minute gifts of the poor widow³; the tumbling of the stones of the Temple⁴.

As engaging and nearly neutral as the Gospel of John's version of Jesus' interactions with Pilate may seem, all of our scriptural imagery is leading to this moment where the Son of God is face to face with the Roman kingdom built of human power and fear. This is the chance where, we assume, Jesus, the famed teacher and preacher of the Good News, can shine. This is where we fight fire with fire, where his disciples are both terrified and absolutely convicted that it is in this interview with Pilate that God's kingdom will ultimately reign, and that finally, their side will win and all will be well.

And in this exchange when Pilate asks him why he's been abandoned by his followers and why his own people think he should be put to death, Jesus looks at Pilate and says, 'Pancakes.'

² https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp26_RCL.html#gsp1

³ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp27_RCL.html#gsp1

⁴ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp28_RCL.html#gsp1

Jesus knows that the kingdom of God looks nothing like our notion of kingdom. Jesus knows the leaders—even the ones considered divinely chosen such as Saul and David and Solomon—were human and failed God’s people again and again because of the allure of and desire for power itself.⁵ *Jesus knows that his disciples, that we, both want to be loved by God and be in control—and that those two things cannot exist simultaneously.*

Jesus’ non sequiturs to Pilate point to a refusal to compete; a refusal to afford him power and legitimacy; a standing of ground and offering a statement which has power only to Jesus: “My kingdom is not of this world,” he says.

In a climate where we brawl over sale-priced Stanley Cups and doorbuster deals⁶; where we feel road rage when someone takes the parking spot we had planned for ourselves; when our anger and despair comes from a sense of frustration and paralysis; when the signs for the candidate we did not vote for are still up on our neighbors’ lawns; when it isn’t our turn, *yet again*; when it’s just not fair, *yet again*— in this climate, in this time, when the powers who find power in power itself seem to have the upper hand: we recall that people only have power *if it is given to them*.

The kingdom of God, the reign of Christ, the image of Christ ruling in majesty—we are most comfortable aligning it with the kingdoms we either love or fear in this life, but Jesus points us his followers into another direction entirely, one where power is not the binding factor, but love. Where fear is not the motivator, but hope. Where the kingdom looks like a holy huddle around an imperfect table, feeding one another the same food, rather than a top down pyramid of hierarchy. Where vulnerability is a gift and not a liability, and where repentance and asking for forgiveness—and being able to receive it—is a sign of strength and courage.

Jesus knows that we would rather tell off a bully with a scathing, cutting, brilliant comeback. And that is because that is the style of power we are accustomed to. If we are to seek the kingdom of God, however—we are not asked to back down from confrontation; we are not asked to submit to it. We are asked by the one who looked into the possibility of alignment with the

⁵ Saul was chosen king after a clamor to Samuel that Israel wanted to ‘be like the other nations’ (a rough response for a people meant to be apart and different from the other nations); his rule started out as prophetic and then turned deadly as he felt his power being threatened, resulting in the death of his son, Jonathan. David, next chosen of Samuel, was an unexpected king, a shepherd and the youngest of his brothers. Chosen by God through Samuel, David rose to power alongside Saul, rescued the ark of the covenant and was hailed a hero. His abuse of both Bathsheba and Uriah, resulting in Uriah’s death and the death of his child with Bathsheba, marked a turn where the political sway of David hindered his reliance on God and God’s ways. The second child of David and Bathsheba was Solomon, known for wisdom and wealth. Solomon was indeed wise, and yet his wealth came from his marriages to women from all the other nations—again, pointing to the turning of God’s promise to be ‘set apart as a nation and people of the Torah’ and towards the political gains from connections with those outside of Israel.

⁶ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-01-09/fans-and-resellers-wait-in-overnight-lines-fight-over-stanley-cups-heres-whats-behind-the-craze>

ultimate power of Rome and *chose to respond differently*, to respond differently when it's our turn.

When we are told that the church is dying and faithful witness is meaningless? Nope.

When they say that small gestures and prayers have no impact? Pass.

When they tell you who is beloved, and who is not; that you are irrelevant and underfunctioning; that God's reign of love and mercy and redemption is not possible in our lifetime and that we are wasting our time every week trying to love one another better, instead of scaling up attacks and strategies to win it all?

Pancakes, friends. Pancakes.

Amen.