

SCANDALOUS KINGSHIP

Sermon for Pentecost Last B—Jn 18:33-37

LPC, 11/25/12

As we enter into college football bowl season, one thing is clear. Winners are king.

This is true in sports, and it's generally true throughout history in countries that have had kings. Even when kingship is hereditary, the king tends to be the one who is most bold and powerful, the most charismatic, competent, confident and attractive. An hereditary king who does not possess winning qualities is vulnerable to replacement by someone else who does possess winning qualities. In short, kings are the winners.

Literally speaking, of course, Americans don't truck much with kings. We pride ourselves on never submitting to kings, or any arbitrary power. As a culture, we resist convention and authority. You've seen that bumper sticker that says, "Question Authority"? That sentiment would be unthinkable in some other cultures, but it seems like a core value in ours.

However we still like the ones who are bold, powerful, charismatic, competent, confident and attractive. We still like winners. Our idolization of pop stars and sports figures shows that. A person who manages to attain fame based on athleticism, talent, or sheer notoriety is more likely to attract the respect of the average American than say, a political figure. Why else would there be such a market for whatever celebrities like Justin Bieber and Kim Kardassian are saying at any particular moment?

No, Americans don't truck much with kings, but if we did, we wouldn't pay much attention to anyone who wasn't obviously a winner. That's what makes the kingship of Jesus of Nazareth such a scandal. By any usual measure, Jesus has or does nothing to attract the allegiance of anyone.

In the scene from John's Gospel we hear today, Jesus is a prisoner. His lack of earthly power is accentuated by the contrast between him and Pontius Pilate, the Roman Emperor's representative in Palestine. There is Pilate, arrayed in a toga, the uniform of Roman aristocracy, possibly with a wreath of laurel, the symbol of victory, on his brow. Perhaps he is holding some wand or scepter symbolizing authority. And there is Jesus, in a mocking travesty of a purple robe, bloodstained and dirty from being flogged. On Jesus' head is a crown of thorns: headgear designed to both torture and degrade. Jesus holds nothing; indeed he cannot hold anything for his wrists are bound. Jesus is not a winner here. He is a prisoner, and a particularly despised prisoner at that.

What does it mean for us to call a man like this our king?

To call a pathetic figure like Jesus our king is a very counter-cultural, even subversive, thing. It means we reject conventional definitions of strength and authority.

Jesus' authority does not come from winning—from exerting dominance over Pilate. Jesus' authority stems from his relationship to God the Father-- a relationship in which Jesus has total confidence, even when challenged by his detractors. Jesus demonstrates strength not in dominance but in uncompromising love.

From the biblical text it has always seemed to me that whereas Pilate has the obvious advantage over Jesus (after all, Jesus is his prisoner), Pilate is deeply unnerved by Jesus. What we know about Pilate from other sources indicates that he was a very worldly man, a career bureaucrat. Pilate, presumably, has seen it all. But what he sees in Jesus stops him cold.

Pilate has seen prisoners begging and prisoners defiant. But Jesus is neither begging nor defiant. Jesus is not playing the game, where someone wins and everyone else loses. I have always felt that Jesus is looking at Pilate with love, and Pilate realizes this. He's never seen the like, and he is completely undone.

This unnerving, loving king who refuses to get caught up in the interplay of winners and losers, this is our king. These are our values as his followers. Might does not make right. Love makes right.

This is the king to whom we Christians pay homage. This is the king to whom we owe our allegiance. This is the king whom we obey. If this sounds otherworldly, it is.

Jesus' kingdom, as he says, is not of this world. But this is the kingdom to which we say we belong when we identify ourselves as Christian.

This king lives in us when we love beyond the limits of reason or human convention. This king lives in us when we refuse to play the zero-sum game of winners and losers.

This king lives in us. How well he lives in us is an issue of how we choose to live.

Long live the king!