

Wicker Park Lutheran Church Preaching Fall 2015

22 November 2015

John 18:33-37

As of late, almost every time I look at my phone I have an alert from a news outlet. One source tells me that at least 129 are dead in terror attacks in Paris. Another announces that the United States House passes a bill restricting flow of refugees from Syria and Iraq. Yet one more says that the suspected mastermind of the Paris attacks was killed in a police raid. Violence, death, and fear seem to reign supreme as of late. And some of us walk around in fear of future terror attacks in America. We notice the violence around the world, violence on streets from guns, and some suffer from the violence from intimate partner abuse.

In today's reading we also see fear and violence take center stage. The actors are assembled and we find Jesus before Pilate. In earlier scenes we've seen Jesus betrayed, arrested, and questioned. Peter has stood around a charcoal fire keeping warm – as I've wanted to do this weekend. And around that fire Peter denied Jesus - twice. So now Jesus stands alone before Pilate.

One statement that caught my eye in today's reading was Jesus' response saying, "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." Often I've seen this statement interpreted as Jesus saying that he's separate from this worldly kingdom. With that interpretation there is the idea that if this conflict were occurring in Jesus's kingdom then his followers would fight for him; however, since Jesus is not in his kingdom then he doesn't have his followers fighting. Or in essence, Jesus is rejecting his participation in the kingdom of the world.

However, it was theologian David Lose that cued me into a different interpretation. He says that if Jesus and his followers were of this world, “then naturally they would use the primary tool [that] this world provides for establishing and keeping power,” namely violence. “But since Jesus is not of this world....Jesus will not defend himself through violence. Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God’s kingdom by violence. Jesus will make no followers by violence.”¹

And often I think our violent world leads us down a rabbit hole of fear. Even in today’s reading Pilate’s response is of fear. After all, Pilate is arguably the most powerful person in Jerusalem at the time. Yet, he’s trapped by fear. The Jewish leaders want Jesus crucified. If Pilate doesn’t give them what they want will those Jewish leaders use violence to remove him from control?² Fear takes over and ultimately leads to the persecution and death of a man whom Pilate “finds no case against” (John 18:38). Fear leads to Pilate finding a loophole to save himself politically. Fear leads to the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus. Fear and violence once again become entwined.

Yet, Jesus’s reign is not one of violence and fear. “Rather, Jesus has come to witness to the truth, the truth that God is love (John 3:16), and that because we have not seen God and have such a hard time imagining God (John 1:18), all too often our imaginations are dominated by our experience. So rather than imagining that God is love, we imagine God to be violent because we live in a world of violence. Rather than recognize the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love, we assume it’s the legal mechanism of punishing Jesus in our stead because we have way too much experience with punitive relationships. Rather than believe that God’s grace and acceptance are absolutely unconditional, we assume God offers love, power, and status only on the condition that we fear, obey, and praise God – and [then] despise those who don’t – because so much of our life is *quid pro quo*.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/christ-the-king-b-not-of-this-world/>

² Peery, Pete. *Feasting on the Word*. “Reign of Christ – Homiletical Perspective.”

But Jesus is not of this world. And therefore his followers will not fight for him, because to bring the kingdom about by violence is to violate the very principles of this kingdom and cause its destruction.”³ Jesus will not engage in fear. Jesus proves his reign is beyond the fear and violence of this world.

This is a hard pill for us to swallow in a world that is shocked, angered, mourning, and fearful. I mean, really, non-violence? Confidence? Calmness? Come on, Jesus, you don’t have ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram! It’s a scary place. Yet while more than half of United States governors declared they didn’t want Syrian refugees anymore, France who was devastated by terror attacks *increased* their promise to accept 30,000 refugees from Syria.⁴ In the midst of a violent military response in Syria we’ve seen the hacker group known as Anonymous increase its non-violent rebellion against ISIS online. We’ve seen the blocking of 78 ISIS-related communication channels by Telegram, which is a highly encrypted online messaging app.⁵ There are in fact many examples of what a non-violent response might look like. And furthermore, a 2011 study on “Why Civil Resistance Works” notes that “nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts.”⁶ So sure, fear and violence are in the world, but we take seriously the biblical call to treat the stranger with love, to welcome the refugee, and to be reflections of God’s love. After all, we have been given so much by our God.

Today as we witnessed Braxton’s baptism we’re reminded that God’s love and grace comes freely to us. It doesn’t matter our country of origin, our political leaning, our race, our age, or our gender, our sexual orientation or gender identity – God comes to us out of pure grace. And God comes to us through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Later in this service three baptized members of this congregation will take their first communion. With

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/christ-the-king-b-not-of-this-world/>

⁴ <http://qz.com/554555/france-has-doubled-down-on-its-promise-to-syrian-refugees-after-the-paris-attacks/>

⁵ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/hacker-group-anonymous-ramps-up-cyber-attacks-on-isis-following-paris-attacks/>

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/derek-flood/is-there-a-nonviolent-isis_b_5670512.html

communion they'll be reminded that this holy meal is a gift from God that strengthens us to serve. When we take communion we become the body of Christ. When we eat this bread and wine it's broken down in our bodies, and then the body of Christ and the blood of Christ become integrated into our DNA. And as a result we're strengthened to serve – to serve those in need, to serve refugees, to serve all people.

The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services work to do that service each day. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services is an affiliated ministry of our denomination, the ELCA. Here in Illinois the local affiliate is known as Refugee One. A few months ago Refugee One welcomed Mayada and her family to Chicago. They were living in Syria in 2011 when the government cracked down on non-violent civilian uprising. Then violence there became an everyday occurrence. One day Mayada's husband was killed on his way home from work. Later bombings began in their town with lasting effect; for now her daughters live with shrapnel in their bodies from those bombings. The day the bombings began they fled to Lebanon. Two years after fleeing, they finally were resettled in the United States – yes, it can be a two-year process to become a U.S. refugee. When they arrived in Chicago Refugee One welcomed them, provided resources in an unfamiliar place, helped teach them English, and registered the children for school. Today Mayada and her family see Chicago as their new home.⁷

This Advent and Christmas season we will help the many refugees and migrants that come to Chicago by supporting Refugee One. We'll begin gathering donations to support and welcome the stranger. In Advent we'll be reminded that Jesus too was a refugee fleeing from the violence of Herod. We'll be reminded of what grace incarnate looks like.

Friends, today is the final day of our liturgical year, or our cycle of readings. On this "Christ the King Sunday" we are reminded of what God's kingdom looks like – it's a reign that dismisses violence and sneers at fear. Today we

⁷ <http://www.refugeeone.org/2015.html>

are strengthened through the sacraments of baptism and communion to serve our neighbors. In this place we're reminded that we are loved without strings attached; here we come to proclaim: come, O God of peace; come, O God of love; come, and make us one. Amen.