

St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
Sermon for Reign of Christ Sunday Year B  
November 23 & 24, 2018  
The Rev. Martha Kirkpatrick

### A Gospel Stance

We come to the last service of the church year and we see Jesus facing Pilate, the man who will order his death by crucifixion. Even if Jesus was not all knowing, he would have known this. This face-to-face between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, that stand-in for Roman imperial authority in the Gospel of John invites us into a central question of our own life of faith. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus tells Pilate. “World,” translated from the Greek *Kosmos*, here means SYSTEM. “my kingdom (Basileia — reign) is not from this SYSTEM.

My ESSENCE is not from this man-made SYSTEM. This system of earthly kingship, which is all about structures of power and control over others. This system of Jew and of Roman, where everything about you is determined by your place in the order of things. This system of wars, ethnic rivalries, violence. If all that I am was from this system, then beating this system — defeating you — would be my ultimate purpose for being here. And I would marshal all my forces to do that. My kingdom is not of this system. This system in the midst of which Jesus stands. My essence, Jesus says is from a different source, he says. The ground of being is something else.

How many Christians really get this? How many wars have been fought over the centuries — are still being fought — as people step up to do battle in defense of Jesus? Or rather, in defense of their idea of Jesus? And how, in so doing, we get it all wrong? What is this SYSTEM in which we — all humanity since the beginning of time — are caught?

And if Jesus offers “something else” which here he calls “truth,” or in another part of the Gospel of John, another way, another life, what does it look like? If we are to see Jesus as an example, as he stands before Pilate, showing us our own stance in the midst of this system, what is that stance?

This got down home and personal for me a few weeks ago. I found myself, once again, getting into angry, really angry, at the pain and injustice of the world. Particularly when I can point my finger at a human cause. In the midst of all that I came to a forceful and clear realization — and I believe it was the practice of Centering Prayer that enabled me to see this — that my outrage was doing damage to my own soul, and wasn't doing the world any good either.

Outrage against another, or a group, however wrong we may feel them to be, is not the gospel stance. Is not the way, the truth, and the life. What is the response? What is the response that Jesus is calling us to see, in our own time, in the midst of the deep pain and brokenness of the world?

It is tempting to remove ourselves, with the usual anesthetics of entertainment, distraction, addictions. Beam me up, Scottie. Sometimes the pain of the world can be overwhelming. We stand in this crucible in this, the only world we've ever known, with people and places we love so deeply, and so much suffering and violence.

Jesus didn't take himself out of the pain and suffering of the world, but engaged it fully. Jesus was not from the world, but he was IN the world.

And here's the thing I want to suggest to you: The ground of Jesus' being was not in this human made system. And neither is yours and neither is mine. That is the truth that Jesus testifies and embodies. It calls for a new way of seeing, what some call "seeing with the eyes of the heart," or "putting the mind in the heart." This is not about emotion, but the deep way of knowing, which does not reside in our heads, but deeper into our bodies, which knows who we truly are, knows that we live and move and have our being in a relational field in which all is held in God, and in which all is being brought to God's fullness. It is the foundational work of all faith traditions, to teach us how to see this deep ground of our being and to look out at the world from that place. But it's not what we've been told or taught. Thankfully, we have guides.

Cynthia Bourgeault describes an experience she had a couple of years ago while standing in the haunting ruins of Tintern Abbey in Wales. Tintern Abbey is a Cistercian Monastery that dates to the 12th century, still largely intact, but empty. For three hundred years, the Abbey had stood as a place of peaceful and compassionate striving to be a "school for the Lord's service." And then in 1536, in the blink of an eye, it all came crashing down as a result of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries edict. Monks were deposed or slaughtered, the building was sacked and vandalized, its treasures were confiscated for the crown. It was all seemingly over in an instant. But as she stood there, she describes picking up the vibrations of the energy of the place, an aliveness that was deep, solemn and serene. This was not about the workings of her rational mind or the creation of sentimental emotions, but something much deeper. It was not the content of the message, but its feeling tones that had her transfixed. Yes, through all the tragedy and violence, something still stands. She describes what she heard in her heart this way: "Know that what is forged in the alchemy of love is beyond the ravages of time. All else may dissolve; this alone remains. But in your own transfigured heart, you will always find it."<sup>1</sup>

This is the truth that Jesus came to witness and proclaim. To spend the time he had, which was only a couple of years teaching, healing, crossing the boundaries of the system that separate people, showing people by his way of being that there is a bigger reality than the one they see. The Christ who was in the beginning, is now, and is bringing all things to himself in deep time. Knowing in a deep and intimate way our own ground of being, that we – that all of life – is held in love – gives us the resilience to stand in the midst of suffering, offer what we can, and not be undone. As we round out the end of the Christian year, we are invited to see that truth anew. This is what community is for, be-

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<sup>1</sup>Cynthia Bourgeault, *Love is the Answer. What is the Question?: Selected Writings and Talks 2016-2018*, (Northeast Wisdom, 2018), 7-11.

cause this is not about our own personal enlightenment for our own sakes: we don't do this alone and we're not meant to. Knowing the truth that all are in relationship and held in God, we embody that truth in the world. The law that God has written in our hearts is known by its opening, aliveness, connection, creativity, and hope. Our work to tap into the heart field, like we are plugging into a big electric current, and for the brief time we are here, to use what we've got to be a force for love. AMEN.