

“What Kind of King WAS Jesus?”

John 18:33-19:22

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church; Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
November 26, 2023

Last May, I got up early to watch the coronation of Britain’s King Charles III which was televised all over the world. What we witnessed was an 8th century ritual that had not been seen since the coronation of his mother--Queen Elizabeth II—some seventy years earlier. The ceremony began with Charles repeating the words of Christ, “I come not to be served, but to serve.” The Archbishop of Canterbury anointed him with holy oil (symbolizing the sacred nature of his rule) and then placed the imperial mantle squarely around his shoulders. After the ancient crown of St. Edward was carefully situated upon his head, he was no longer Charles, Prince of Wales, but now CHARLES III, THE NEW KING OF ENGLAND.

Aside from his acknowledgement that he had come to serve and NOT BE served, Charles’ life and investiture had almost NOTHING in common with that experienced by Jesus of Nazareth. Where Charles was born in a palace, surrounded by maids and butlers and fancy footmen, Jesus arrived in this world in the back of a filthy animal stall surrounded by mooing cows and flea-bitten horses. Where Charles grew up in a major city with all the trappings of wealth and power at his disposal, Jesus was raised under the humblest of circumstances in a small, unheralded village. Where Charles was groomed to one day occupy the same throne his mother sat upon, it was fully expected that Jesus would become a carpenter, just like his father, Joseph. Where Charles was crowned amid all the pomp and pageantry of Westminster Abbey with the many of the world’s most powerful leaders in attendance, Jesus was surrounded by a jeering crowd and a pair of criminals on a hill just outside Jerusalem called Golgotha. And where Charles’ authority was bestowed while sitting upon the chair of St. Edward, the same seat where for seven hundred years the previous kings of England had been installed, Jesus’ throne was nothing more than a simple cross and his CROWN, a wreath of thorns that pierced his brow.

No, Jesus was not your typical monarch- certainly not in the style of Herod, who was then King of Israel, or the Emperor Caesar Augustus, who reigned supreme over the world’s greatest empire. It seemed Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea, never understood the KIND OF KING Jesus represented or the NATURE of the kingdom he had come to rule over and our text makes this clear. Perhaps he thought of him as some kind of comic figure, a fool who suffered from gross delusions of grandeur. That this poor, uncredentialed street preacher could pose a threat to the mightiest military force the world had ever seen had to have seemed laughable to him.

Of course, if that were SO, there were OTHERS throughout history who LIKEWISE suffered from such pretensions. In 1859, Abraham Joshua Norton of San Francisco declared himself “Norton I., Emperor of the United States” and four years later after Napoleon III invaded Mexico, he added the SECONDARY title of “Protector of Mexico.” He had no formal political power and yet he would imperiously stride through the streets of that city, visiting the local businesses outfitted in full regalia with over-sized gold epaulets, a sword, and a beaver hat with

an ostrich plume sticking out it. People would greet and treat him with the same deference that one would an actual sovereign. Norton got free ferry and train passage and a variety of favors such as help with rent and free meals from well-placed friends and sympathizers. Some considered Norton to be insane or an eccentric with messianic delusions, but residents of San Francisco enjoyed his imperial presence and took note of his frequent newspaper proclamations. But all the good fun came to an end when on January 8, 1880, he collapsed and died before he could be given medical treatment. At his funeral, it was estimated that upwards of 10,000 people lined the streets of San Francisco to pay their respects while the funeral cortege that followed his body to the city's Masonic cemetery stretched two miles long.

Did Pilate regard Jesus like some kind of early-day Emperor Norton, someone to be more pitied than feared? Who knows. The fact is that throughout both the Old and New Testaments, it is stated that the Messiah--the long-promised one of Israel--would come as a king, a monarch of sorts. Therefore, it's not surprising that in his role as the Messiah (or Deliverer) to his people, Christ was often viewed by them as their king. In the gospels, he is addressed as the "King of Israel" and "King of the Jews" by Romans and by the Magi. In his epistles, such as in 1 Timothy, St. Paul hails him as the "King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God." In the Book of Revelation, he is variously referred to as the "King of kings," "King of the ages," and as "Ruler of the kings of the earth." John Calvin along with the Heidelberg Confession and the Westminster Shorter Catechism affirmed that Christ performed three functions in his earthly ministry- the offices of prophet, priest, and king.

Yet, what makes our Lord's kingship TRULY unique is that Jesus came not to assert his DOMINANCE over humanity but to SERVE it- in much the same spirit that Charles had vowed at his investiture. Moreover, Christ said he did not come to EXALT himself but to RENOUNCE his glory and become one with us in the interests of reconciling us back to God, that this was the will of his Father in heaven. The great characteristics of his life were humility, obedience, and self-renunciation- THESE were the great hallmarks of his life and ministry, all born from a heart filled with love and compassion for the entire world. Therefore, WE are urged to practice humble, self-sacrificing, self-denying service OURSELVES as HE becomes the one and only model for all Christians' behavior. As Paul instructed the church at Philippi:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

I want to end my sermon by sharing with you a simple story, one which illustrates this lesson of divine submission in a most powerful way. It isn't one of the parables of Christ but the work of one of the great Christian thinkers of the 19th century, a Dane by the name of Soren Kierkegaard. It concerns a king who was the most powerful and wealthy ruler of his age. He was SO powerful that every statesman feared his wrath, every foreign minister trembled before

him, and all his subjects were quick to praise him. Now you would think that someone of his position would have nothing to worry about, and yet worry he DID. He wasn't afraid that his kingdom might come under attack or that his people might seek to overthrow him. NO, he was worried because he had succumbed to something very common to our OWN lives- he had fallen in love.

But falling in love CAN be a very dangerous thing. When THE HEART AND FEELINGS OVERWHELM THE CLEAR LOGIC OF ONE'S HEAD, it can often lead to irrational or unwise decisions. Thus the monarch might be susceptible to issuing foolish and imprudent judgments and decrees that would eventually hurt him and his kingdom. Then again, it was possible that his passion for this person might be solely EMOTIONAL, perhaps nothing more than a passing fancy on his part which he would later come to regret. Of course, there was also the chance that his offer of love just may be rejected. Charlie Brown of Peanuts fame knew all about the bitterness of unrequited love, even comparing it to a peanut butter sandwich. But there was yet another, perhaps love's GREATEST risk, and it proved to be the king's WORST fear- the conceivability that the female in question just might be SO overwhelmed by everything he represented--his absolute power, his unrivalled prestige, and his phenomenal wealth--that she'd never come to appreciate him for who he was as a human being. She'd be so enthralled by all the trappings of royal privilege that she'd never love the king for the person he was.

Now if the relationship between the king and this other person was one as among equals, it might not pose that big a problem. In former times, kings were often wedded to queens from other countries so that their power and assets might be consolidated to create a more powerful dynasty between them. But that was not the problem HERE. The crux of HIS dilemma was that the object of his love was NOT a queen, NOT a princess, NOR was she some regal counterpart. Instead, she was A LOWLY MAIDEN- a girl without title or means of any kind. She was a poor and humble commoner and the richest and most powerful man of that day found himself deeply in love with her. And so his problem came down to this- how could he win her love UNCONDITIONALLY, that is, how could he be loved in return for who he WAS and not for what he POSSESSED OR REPRESENTED? We've all heard stories of young, good looking men or women who manage to seduce the hearts and minds of much older persons for their wealth and standing in society- how could he be sure that were he to marry the young lady in question that she would not simply be looking for a sugar daddy to care for her while HE was looking for a partner in life who would simply love him for who he was.

You see, if the king were to appear before the young maiden in all his regal garb and overwhelm her with all his courtesans and soldiers, his carriages and his horses, he would doubtless receive her praise and adoration- but that would be all. He would be glorified as the king but never be loved as her HUSBAND for she would always be mindful of who she was and where she came from. He didn't want worship from her but rather the LOVE AS BETWEEN EQUALS for only THEN can love be unfettered, that is, without any strings attached. He wanted her to FORGET the very fact that he was a king and that she had been a humble maiden.

If, on the other hand, the king would elevate her up to himself by putting a crown upon her head and making a queen out of her, she too would have power, wealth and majesty, but it

STILL would not necessarily be a marriage as between equals. She would always remember that her gratitude to the king must always come before her love, for she had been BESTOWED that great and honored position by him; her equality would be EXTERNAL but not INTERNAL. You see, if there was to be a genuine relationship of trust and love, it would have to develop IN FREEDOM, without any alluring inducements. For her love to be honest and true, he could not BRIBE HER LOVE in any manner; it would have to be based upon a mutual affection and devotion, IRRESPECTIVE of each person's circumstance.

Well how DOES the king go about trying to resolve his predicament? He certainly could not COMMAND or LEGISLATE her love for we know that love does not operate that way. Neither did he want to BUY the maiden's love by overwhelming her with beautiful and expensive gifts. Nor did he want to STEAL her heart by luring her to his palatial estate and promising that it and all its grandeur would be hers if only she would just accept his proposal. Rather, the king's love for the poor maiden was such that his concern was first for HER happiness and HER concerns rather than his own, that he would much rather not have her AT ALL if she could not be content living with and loving him. As Kierkegaard put it, because of his love for her, it would have been far easier for him to lose her, than to settle being her benefactor.

Indeed, it seems evident that this king's love was genuine and pure- a devotion that stands in stark contrast to so much of what passes for TRUE love as WE tend to know it. The quality of HIS love was similar to what the Apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13: love as always patient and kind, never jealous or boastful, never arrogant or rude. His love did not seek its own way or makes constant demands but instead was willing to BEAR all things, BELIEVE all things, HOPE all things, and ENDURE all things. It was a devotion that had no regard for her low position or standing, a love that paid little heed to any of her imperfections and character defects. It was thus a love which could be described as FREE and UNCONDITIONAL.

Practically speaking, most love WE'VE experienced has never seemed quite so pure or ideal. OUR love is tinged by all our humanness, our fallibility, and our self-interests that even our purest and noblest thoughts are saturated through and through by jealousy and selfishness. I suspect that had WE had been the king and desirous of that maiden, we probably might have resorted to some sort of cunning and seduced her in the same way King David seduced Bathsheba. Perhaps, we might have been satisfied bribing her with gifts just to keep her around. Maybe we might even take the attitude, "If I can't have her, then NOBODY will!" and so we kidnap her and keep her locked up in a gilded cage like the Phantom of the Opera did to the beautiful Christine, or possibly even DESTROY her so nobody ELSE could have her. I remember seeing a bumper sticker years ago when I lived in California which read "If you love something, you will let it go. If it doesn't come back to you, then hunt it down and KILL it." Although it was an attempt at dark humor, it DOES underscore what the Bible itself says, that our hearts are "desperately wicked," so MUCH so that we don't even know the depths of our own evil. What was once love can very easily deteriorate into a destructive passion we use to possess or control others with which in the process may ultimately destroy ourselves and others WITH it.

Well now we come to the \$64,000 question: How DOES the king go about expressing his love for the young maiden WITHOUT overwhelming her with his powerful position or using bribery or even coercion to gain the thing he desires most in this world? Keep in mind that his goal is not the young maiden herself whom he could FORCE to appear before him in a moment's notice- it is her WILL, her HEART, her LOVE as pure and as freely given as his is for her he desires above EVERYTHING else. Well Kierkegaard resolves the problem this way: NOT by elevating the girl to royal status but JUST THE OPPOSITE- by DESCENDING from his regal throne and JOINING HIS LIFE TO HERS in all her poverty and commonness and lack of sophistication. The king chooses to surrender every bit of his glory and honor and wealth and security to become COMMON HIMSELF and thus share in the same low estate as the girl he loves, spending the rest of his days as a humble peasant rather than that of a regal king.

Through such an act of self-surrender, he demonstrates just how genuine his love is and he does so by divesting himself of everything BEFOREHAND, without the slightest guarantee that she will even marry him. He abdicates his throne FIRST so that once he relinquishes it, it thus becomes FINAL; there could be no change of mind or heart, no chance of ever going back to what he was REGARDLESS of whether she accepts his proposal or not. In this way, if the maiden DOES fall in love with the king, he will now know FOR SURE that it will NOT BE for his position and power and wealth for all these are gone forever. Having learned first-hand how all the privilege in all the world could never alleviate the deep and terrible loneliness that consumed him, he will NOW discover that his new-found love—in spite of its poverty--will prove MUCH RICHER AND MORE REWARDING than his FORMER life with all its advantages. Meanwhile, the maiden will know just how much THE KING LOVES HER- SO much so that he has surrendered all power and privilege in order to spend the rest of his life alongside her in all her lowliness.

Well, by now I think we all know that this is so much MORE than a story about a king and a young girl- that it is REALLY about God and God's love for US, his lowly creation. The truth is that WE are that beloved maiden and God is that king, that dogged suitor who has appeared to us, not in all his glory but as a homeless pauper- "in the form of a servant" as Paul wrote in Philippians. Jesus, as the very revelation of the face and heart of God, reveals God precisely through his humility, his meekness, and his selfless love; by his willingness to abandon the privileges that were his in heaven so that he might win over our hearts and minds and ultimately be united to the ones he loves. While the rest of the world looks to a deity that is all-powerful, all-consuming, a JEALOUS God ready to strike down those who transgress him, we Christians honor and adore a SACRIFICIAL God, a God who loves us SO MUCH that he even DIES on our behalf in order to PROVE his love for us.

By surrendering his throne and with it all his power and majesty and glory, Christ became in every sense of the word "Emanuel," or "God with us." If not for this incredible drama, we might fear God for the overwhelming power he possesses, but never would our hearts and minds be drawn to him with a love that claims our whole being. In Christ alone--through his BIRTH in a lowly manger, his LIFE as a poor itinerant, and his DEATH as a criminal--has God demonstrated his unconditional love for us, and as that truth is driven ever deeper into our hearts, we can only respond by loving HIM in RETURN! Therefore, it would not be very hard

for US to arrive at the same conclusion that KIERKEGAARD did when he wrote: “It’s certainly possible for one to imagine himself the equal of God, or to imagine God to be the equal of man, but NEVER could he imagine that God would condescend to our own level and then SUFFER for us. For WITHOUT such a sign from God, how could it POSSIBLY enter into the mind of man that God could EVER love us so.” Let us pray...

O God, we praise and adore you. You are truly without beginning or ending; your reign is eternal and your being all-powerful, and yet you chose to reveal your power in the most powerless and vulnerable manner there is- as a baby. As you shared our humanity in Jesus, you gave the world a NEW understanding of power. We know now that power is not to be used to dominate, but to serve others as Christ himself did. As he helped transform the love of power by the power of his love, may we discover that same love and humility in our OWN lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.