

“My Kingdom Is Not of This World,” John 18:28-40 (Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 11, 2018)

²⁸ Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate went outside to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰ They answered him, “If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.” ³¹ Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” ³² This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

³³ So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” ³⁷ Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸ Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” ⁴⁰ They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

PRAY

In these weeks leading up to Easter Sunday we are looking at the arrest and trial of Jesus. Today we are studying Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the Roman governor over the Jews in Jerusalem early in the first century. He was responsible for keeping the peace over Jerusalem and preserving the Roman Empire’s interests there.

We read in verses 28-32 how the Jewish religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate. The Romans, once they took over a new territory, typically took away from the local government their right to exercise capital punishment – to sentence someone to death. These Jewish leaders, however, want Jesus dead, so they bring Jesus to Pilate in the hope that he will order Jesus’ death.

But Pilate refuses to just give these men what they want and instead insists on interviewing Jesus. In verse 33, Pilate asks Jesus a question: “Are you the king of the Jews?” This is a very important question – all four gospel writers take pains to point out that Pilate asked Jesus this. Why is it such an important question?

Because Pilate wants to know whether or not Jesus is a political radical. That’s what the Jewish religious leaders told Pilate. They want Jesus dead, and there’s no better way to get the Romans to kill him than by getting them to think that. Is Jesus a political threat to Caesar or not?

That means this is a sermon about politics. I don't mind admitting that once I figured out that was the point of this passage, I got kind of nervous about it. I thought, "What have I gotten myself into?" But lucky for me this text came up on the Sunday when we will have our lowest attendance of the year. Fewer people than normal are here to watch me walk through this minefield and fewer people will wind up getting offended by what I have to say.

Our country has always been divided over politics. If you know history then you know that. Politics in the United States has never been pretty. Just read some of the things John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, our second and third presidents, said about one another. But while you might not have liked another person's politics, until recently you could still associate with them. Still play golf and be friends with them.

However, in the last fifteen to twenty years politics in our country has gone beyond just disagreement and division. Now in our country the people on the other side of the political divide aren't just wrong – they are viewed as evil. Increasingly the message we hear is, "You are an immoral person if you disagree with me politically." We are so divided.

But I think there is hope for our politics in this passage. Three things: first, the flexibility of Jesus' politics. Second, the firmness of Jesus' politics. Third, the foundation of Jesus' politics.

First, the flexibility of Jesus' politics. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He wants to know whether or not Jesus is leading a political rebellion against Caesar. In verse 36 Jesus answers Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."

Jesus is saying, "Pilate, you hear the word 'king' and you think of a man with a sword leading a band of soldiers to fight against some other man and his group of soldiers. That's all you know about kings. I, however, am not that kind of king. I have not come to fight Caesar in that way."

In Luke 22, we read that when Jesus was arrested by a bunch of armed, Roman soldiers, he said to them, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? ⁵³ When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness." Luke 22:52-53. In other words, Jesus is saying, "I've never been armed. I've never tried to take power. I'm not armed now. Why did you think in order to arrest me you needed all this firepower? I'm not that kind of king. I am not leading a rebellion."

Another way to put it is that Jesus is saying, "Pilate, I've been doing ministry publically in your domain for three years, yet you have no evidence that I've ever tried to organize a political party to oppose you."

As you read about the ministry of Jesus in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, one of the things you notice about Jesus is that his friends and his enemies were from all over the political spectrum. In Luke 6:15, we read a list of Jesus' twelve disciples. In that list we find someone named Simon the Zealot. That doesn't mean that his last name was "Zealot." He

wasn't Mr. Zealot. It means he was a member of the political party in Israel called "the Zealots," who wanted more than anything else to kill Romans soldiers and drive them out of Israel.

So, Jesus was leading a rebellion after all! No, he wasn't. Because in that same list we find Matthew, who was a tax collector. The way the Romans kept Israel under control was by garrisoning the country with their Roman legions. But it was expensive to provide for all those men. The way the Romans did that was by employing Jews, like Matthew, to go out and collect the money from their fellow Jews to feed these Roman soldiers. Can you imagine how much the Jews must have hated the tax collectors? They viewed them as traitors. Yet here among Jesus' friends we have both someone who probably swore an oath at some point in his life to kill every Roman he could and someone who probably extorted money from his fellow Jews to make sure those same Romans had food to eat and sharp swords to fight with. Polar opposite politics, yet both followers of Jesus.

In Mark 3:6, we read, "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." That sounds like a throwaway verse until you know the context. The Pharisees were Jews who insisted on religious purity – they refused to associate with the Romans, even though the Romans had all the power. The Herodians were Jews who decided that they needed to make the best of a bad situation, and they decided to cooperate with the Romans and their client kings, the various men named Herod who sat on the throne of Israel. The Pharisees viewed the Herodians as sellouts, the Herodians viewed the Pharisees as religious nuts. Polar opposite politics, yet both determined to kill Jesus.

What does all this tell us? *It tells us you can't slap a nice, simple, easy political label on Jesus.* Jesus had friends and enemies across partisan lines. It was true then, and it is true today.

Some Christians in our country are saying, "All real Christians, all Bible-believing Christians, must vote for the candidates in this political party, must support this particular political program, must line up in favor of this specific answer to a political problem." They think that if you don't vote the way they do, then you are some kind of wishy-washy, lukewarm, or mistaken Christian.

I disagree with that thinking mainly because *it is so easy to get political questions wrong*. Last week a Baptist minister in Mississippi wrote an article published in the Jackson paper titled, "Would Jesus OK [the] Starkville Pride Parade?" If you're not aware, the Starkville Board of Alderman voted a few weeks ago to deny a permit to a group who wanted to hold the first ever Starkville gay pride parade. The board has since reversed its stance and granted the permit.

But before they reversed their position a minister in Starkville wrote this article. He wrote that the "no" vote was motivated by anti-gay bigotry, and then he said, "Interpreting the Holy Scriptures in order to condemn the LGBTQ community is too narrow, too legalistic and too short-sighted. A limited view of God and Scripture fails to see the larger story of scandalous grace at work from Genesis through Revelation; it fails to follow the unpredictable Spirit of God moving freely, without restraint, and always finding the most excluded 'outsiders' and welcoming them in; and, it fails to be humbled by the Gospel texts which reveal the wildly-inclusive love of Jesus and the wide diversity of God's kingdom ... It does not take much to

imagine the religious leaders [of Jesus' day] accusing Jesus of being gay, because, if we believe the Gospels, clearly Jesus would be laughing and celebrating with his friends at a pride parade."

According to this minister, Jesus wouldn't just OK the pride parade – he'd march in it. Is that true? I don't think so, because I don't take the same lesson from the Scriptures that he does. To show why I'll substitute the word "polygamist" for "LGBTQ" in the article. "Interpreting the Holy Scriptures in order to condemn the polygamist community is too narrow, too legalistic and too short-sighted. A limited view of God and Scripture fails ... to follow the unpredictable Spirit of God moving freely, without restraint, and always finding the most excluded 'outsiders' [including polygamists] and welcoming them in ..."

I don't think this minister would actually draw that conclusion, but if he were consistent he would. Either the Spirit of God moves freely, without restraint, liberating the LGBTQ and the polygamist community, bring all the outsiders in, or he doesn't. But I believe that there is a restraint on how the Spirit of God moves – he will never move you into sin. Sex outside of marriage between one man and one woman *is* sin, it is destructive, so you can't use that kind of logic to say that Jesus would march in a gay pride parade.

That's Starkville. What about Oxford? Our town, unlike Starkville, has already had two gay pride parades. How did I as a Christian minister react to those parades? I didn't march in the pride parade, and I feel sure I was right not to do that, but neither did I lobby the Oxford Board of Alderman to deny their permit, nor did I protest against the parade. I didn't think that would be helpful. I was either at home or work when they took place and I didn't take much notice of them at all. Was that the right thing to do? I think so, but a lot of Christians might think it wasn't. But because I'm not totally sure I didn't write articles in *The Oxford Eagle* telling you what stand you, as a Christian, had to take.

Political questions aren't nice and easy and simple. They take wisdom. Therefore, while Christians are certainly free to get involved in politics, we have to be careful not to take political power in Jesus' name. Jesus is the one who said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's." The interests of a human government, led by sinful men and women, and Jesus will never perfectly overlap. They can't – Jesus is perfect and we are not! I find it ironic that all the Christians out there telling you how you need to vote would never want to tell you which house you need to buy, who you need to marry, how many kids you need to have even though political questions take more wisdom to answer than all those questions do put together.

Now, does all this mean that Jesus doesn't care about politics at all? That he's not worried about which groups have power in society and what they do with it? That Christians must never under any circumstances take a stand about anything for fear they might get it wrong? Absolutely not.

Second, the firmness of Jesus' politics. If Jesus wanted to avoid trouble with Pilate completely it would have been easy. When Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" all Jesus had to say was, "No! Never claimed to be a king, don't want to be one now. Caesar is my king." But instead Jesus said, "I have a kingdom – it's just not of this world. I have servants – they're just

not fighting you right now.” He leaves the door open for Pilate to wonder what Jesus means by “kingdom.”

Verse 37: “Then Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.’”

While you couldn’t slap a specific political label on Jesus, you absolutely knew where he stood. *He stood on the side of truth.* The truth is that Jesus is God. His kingdom is not of this world, but it includes this world. And one day every knee will 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.

That is the truth, and if we are to follow Jesus we must be firm and unflinching in bearing witness to that truth. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one goes to God, no one has eternal life, except through him. *But is that all we are to be firm about?* Just spiritual things like that, or are there some more earthly, more possibly political and controversial things, we must also take firm stands on as Christians?

Absolutely there are. One night during Thanksgiving week of 1967, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the home of rabbi and civil rights advocate Perry Nussbaum of Jackson, Mississippi. Two months earlier his Beth Israel Congregation synagogue had also been bombed. The morning after the rabbi stood outside his destroyed home with the governor of Mississippi and the pastor of a very prominent church in the Jackson. And with an NBC TV camera crew filming the aftermath of the violence, the rabbi turned to the pastor, shook his finger in his face, and said, “If you had spoken out from your pulpit after the synagogue was bombed and told your people it was wrong to have done that, this wouldn’t have happened.” The pastor had a view of Christian ethics called “the spirituality of the church,” which basically said that Christians and churches were to restrict themselves to the preaching of the abstract gospel of Jesus Christ. They were to stick to the spiritual and to never, under any circumstances, take a stand on anything that could remotely be seen as political. To a lot of white Mississippians in the 1960s, racism was a political, not a moral, issue, so the church did not talk about it.

That was wrong. Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse, said, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” When we find those things in society that break the heart of God, we must refuse to countenance them. Our politics must be firm and unflinching in that way. Jesus calls us to bear witness to the truth, and the truth is that racism is evil and the structures in society that promote white supremacy are evil. The truth is God hates poverty, he hates it when children go to bed hungry or go through the winter cold. The truth is that children are a blessing from the Lord and are human beings from the moment of conception and are worthy of dignity as bearers of the image of God. Our politics must be firm about that.

You say, “Alright, but J.D., Democrats are known for their desire to help the poor and Republicans are known for their opposition to abortion. So who do we vote for?” My answer is: have you already forgotten the first point? *No one political party has a monopoly on wisdom.* No single political party is ever going to perfectly express the heart of Jesus. Political parties are fallen, because they are led by fallen human beings.

Yes, Democrats might be known for their stance on poverty, but it might just be that Republicans have some of the best ideas for how to end it. Yes, Republicans might be known for their stance on abortion, but it might take some Democrat's ideas to actually get the numbers of abortions down in our country. We must be firm in our convictions but flexible and humble enough about the nuts and bolts of the politics that lead to the solutions.

If you claim to follow Jesus, he's going to change you over time, right? You can't walk with Jesus for twenty or thirty years (like a lot of us have) and not be changed in thousand different ways, can you? You will grow in wisdom. But a lot of people would say, "Yes, I've walked with Jesus for the last thirty years, but my politics haven't changed a bit. I basically view the world the same way I did thirty years ago, and I'm ok with that." But if your politics never change at all, what you're actually saying is you're no wiser about the world now than you were thirty years ago. You haven't learned anything. Would that be acceptable in any other part of your life? Would it be ok to say that about relationships? "I've been following Jesus for thirty years, but I have no more relationship skills than I did thirty years ago. I've learned nothing about being a parent over the last thirty years." When you refuse to change you've made an idol out of being a Republican or Democrat or capitalist or socialist. Your slavery to your political idol forbids you from changing. Following Jesus does not mean you have to change political parties, but it must mean you are constantly growing in your understanding of the problems our country faces and are open to listening to new solutions as they are proposed.

Now if you are kind of militant in your politics, you may think this "bear witness to the truth" approach is foolish. You think we will just get run over if we do this. You think we have to have power, we have to win elections, we must be in control no matter what it takes.

You know who else felt that way? Pilate. When Jesus told Pilate, "I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth," Pilate scoffed at him. He said in verse 38, "What is truth?" Pilate rolled his eyes at Jesus. Pilate says, "Who knows or cares what the truth is? What matters is power! What matters is control!" It's no accident that during both his trial before the high priest and at his trial before Pilate Jesus got punched in the mouth. Why did they hit Jesus? Because they wanted Jesus to know they were in control, and he wasn't. They had the power to hit him, and he couldn't do anything about it.

But they were wrong. Jesus had all the power. Why? Third, the foundation of Jesus' politics. In John 18:39-40, Pilate says to the people, "But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" ⁴⁰ They cried out again, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a robber."

"Robber" is a misleading translation, because when you combine what all the gospels say about Barabbas it's clear he was a rebel leader. Barabbas had been arrested while trying to lead a revolt against Rome. He was a Zealot, an insurrectionist. He was trying to kill the enemy, punch him in the face, show the Romans who had the power.

I've always wondered – if Barabbas wanted to kill Romans then why would Pilate let him go? Tom Skinner preached a powerful sermon about Barabbas at the 1970 Urbana missions

conference, one of the most powerful sermons I've ever heard. I've known about this sermon for years, but a few months ago I was able to locate it on the internet and listen to it. In the sermon he says, "[It's v]ery simple [why Pilate let him go]: if you let Barabbas go, you can always stop him. The most Barabbas will do is go out, round up another bunch of guerrillas and start another riot. And you will always stop him by rolling your tanks into his neighborhood, bringing out the National Guard and putting his riot down ... You can always stop Barabbas.

"But how do you stop Jesus? They took him and nailed him to a cross. But they did not realize that, in nailing Jesus to the cross, they were putting up on that cross the sinful nature of all humanity ... [a]s Christ was nailed to the cross, it was more than just a political radical dying; he was God's answer to the human dilemma. On that cross Christ was bearing in his own body my sin, and he was proclaiming my liberation on that cross. And on that cross he shed his blood to cleanse me of all my sin, to set me free. They took and buried him, rolled a stone over his grave, wiped their hands and said, 'That is one radical who will never disturb us again. We have gotten rid of him. We will never hear any more of his words of revolution.'

"Three days later Jesus Christ pulled off one of the greatest political coups of all time: he got up out of the grave. When he arose from the dead, the Bible now calls him the second man, the new man, the leader of a new creation. A Christ who has come to overthrow the existing order and to establish a new order that is not built on man. Keep in mind, my friend, with all your militancy and radicalism, that all the systems of men are doomed to destruction. All the systems of men will crumble and, finally, only God's kingdom and his righteousness will prevail."

With his resurrection Jesus showed us what real power is like. *His kingdom is coming and no political power on earth can stop it.* Therefore, **we don't have to practice politics like the world does** – thinking that one political party has all the answers, that we must do whatever we can (even to the point of compromising our principles) to keep the other guy from winning, that if the other guy wins the world is over.

We must bear witness to the truth – what breaks God's heart must break ours, and we must tell people that. We can vote. We can contribute. We can campaign. We can protest. *But when we do we don't have to feel like the world is on the line, because it's not.* Jesus has already won!

Pilate thought he had power because he could control people. He could arrest Jesus, he could crucify Jesus, he could force people to do what he wanted. But Jesus knew that real power doesn't come from controlling people – ***it comes from changing people.*** *The foundation of Jesus' politics is love.* On the cross Jesus loved you, and if you believe that it changes you. When we go out and love other people in his name, eventually he will change them, too. That will change the world because love, not control, is what gives power.

Last week I saw the movie *Lady Bird*. It's a coming of age movie about a high school senior in Sacramento, California named Lady Bird. It was nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award. I can't really recommend it because of some of its content, but there was one line in the movie that really struck me.

Toward the end of the movie Lady Bird meets with her Catholic high school's guidance counselor, who is a nun. After reading her college entrance essay, Sister Sarah Joan remarks that Lady Bird clearly loves her city. "You write about Sacramento so affectionately, and with such care," she says. Which is funny, because the whole movie Lady Bird complains about how much she hates Sacramento. When Lady Bird replies that it's just because she pays attention, Sister Sarah Joan says, "Don't you think they are the same thing? Love and attention?" *I like that.*

If you don't constantly remember that Jesus by his resurrection has already won, you won't feel like you have the luxury of loving the people around you by giving them your attention. You'll be too busy holding on to power or getting it for yourself, because you'll think it's all up to you to make sure the world doesn't fall apart. You won't give your kids the attention they need, or your spouse, or your parents, or your friends. ***And you will certainly not honor Jesus with your politics.*** You won't give people with different politics your loving attention – you'll just yell at them, or bash them on Twitter or Facebook, or cheer as MSNBC or Fox News does it for you. When you do that you think you're changing people, but you're not. You're not helping your political cause; you're just making everything worse.

Jesus proves that real power comes from love. Only love changes people. That's the foundation of Jesus' politics. Let's make it the foundation of ours, and it will change the world. AMEN