

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's reading from John does not feel very Advent-like or even close to Christmas. In fact, it feels more appropriate on the day we often hear it, Good Friday. Yet, this reading does offer us some important glimpses into our Advent life together. In today's gospel, we dropped in after the actors were assembled and heard that Jesus was before Pilate. Remember, in earlier scenes, Jesus was betrayed by Judas. While Jesus was being arrested in the garden, Peter pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Yet, Jesus told Peter to refrain from violence and to put away his sword. After that, Jesus was paraded before the High Priest to be questioned before being sent to Pilate. In the meantime, Peter stood around a charcoal fire keeping warm and denied knowing Jesus three times. Now we get to today's reading where Jesus stands alone before Pilate.

This exchange between Jesus and Pilate is iconic. It's a traditional Hellenistic "battle of the wits" where individuals use clever arguments, sharp retorts, and displays of knowledge or rhetorical skills. In the mist of this exchange, Jesus retorted, "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 Temple Authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Often time, this statement is interpreted as Jesus saying that his rule is otherworldly. And, with that interpretation, there is the idea that if a conflict were to occur in Jesus's kingdom (wherever that is), then his followers would fight for him;

however, since Jesus is not in his kingdom, then his followers aren't fighting. Or in essence, Jesus is rejecting to participate in our world.

However, Rev. Dr. David Lose 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 For Jesus' kingdom is present and active in our world but does not operate like this world.

And this violent world we live in often leads us down a rabbit hole of fear. In today's reading, Pilate's response was of fear, and Pilate was arguably the most powerful person in Jerusalem at the time. Yet, he was trapped by fear. The Temple Authorities wanted Jesus crucified, and if Pilate didn't give them what they wanted, then would those Temple Authorities have used violence to remove him?² You see, fear took over and led to the persecution and death of a man whom Pilate found "no case against" (John 18:38). Fear led Pilate to search for a loophole to politically save himself when he offered up either Barabbas or Jesus to be released. Fear led to the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus. The gospels remind us that fear and violence often become entwined.

Yet, in John's gospel, Jesus's reign is not one of violence and fear. Rather, Jesus came to witness to truth, the truth that God is love (John 3:16). But,

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."

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 empire's attempt to control, we assume it is a legalistic mechanism of punishing Jesus in our stead because we have too much experience with punitive relationships. Rather than believe that God's grace and acceptance are unconditional, we assume that 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*.

But Jesus is not of this world, so he will not bring about God's kingdom by violence. For that would violate the very principles of God's kingdom and cause its destruction.³ You see, in John's gospel, Jesus refuses to engage in fear. Jesus proves his reign is beyond the fear and violence of this world.

That is a hard pill for us to swallow in a world that is shocked, angered, mourning, and fearful. I mean, really, is non-violence truly a way? How can we be calm at a time like this? Jesus didn't have Russian missals, a regime change at the White House, and individuals looking to control your body and who you love. This world is a scary place. These days it doesn't seem to be any way to survive without using violence. The world has tricked us into believing that when someone punches, you punch back and you knock them to the ground. And that is a very human response. That is why in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear "an eye for an eye" so as to limit our desire to seek

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

revenge and do even more damage. That is because the Law of Moses was meant to promote justice and limit revenge specifically in the legal system. Yet, Jesus reframes that by saying non-violence, forgiveness, and love are what his kingdom is about.

And that's hard. We don't want to believe that's possible, and that's maybe because it's not something we're steeped in. However, Harvard University political scientist Erica Chenoweth reviewed literature on civil resistance and social movements from 1900 to 2006 and discovered that peaceful resistance was twice as successful as violent conflict.⁴ And you can probably think of a handful of instances yourself, like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Susan B Anthony, and the list goes on. While these may not be as prevalent in our daily lives or in the media we consume, they are often more effective.

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. As we journey through this Advent season, we are reminded of what God's kingdom looks like – it's a reign that rejects violence and fear. Today we are strengthened through the sacraments of baptism and communion to serve our neighbors. For in this place we are reminded of God's love, God's presence, and an entirely achievable vision of a world without violence and fear. This is our sure and certain hope this Advent season. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world>