

Gospel Reading: John 18:33-37

The Voice of a King

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In his book *Lifesigns*, Henri Nouwen writes ... “A careful look at the gospels shows that Jesus seldom accepted the questions posed to him. He exposed them as coming from the house of fear.

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

How often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?

Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife on any pretext whatever?

What authority do you have for acting like this?

At the resurrection, to which of those seven men she married will she be a wife, since she had been married to them all?

Are you the king of the Jews?

Lord, has the hour come?

Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel? ...

“To none of these questions,” Nouwen writes, “did Jesus give a direct answer. He gently put them aside as questions emerging from false worries. They were raised out of concern for prestige, influence, power, and control. They did not belong to the house of God.

Therefore Jesus always transformed the questions by his answer. He made the question new—and only then worthy of his response. *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*, from the introduction By Henri J. M. Nouwen

How we react to the world is often out of our fears. Many of our own questions originate from our inner most fears ... the fear of loneliness ... of separation ... of being hurt ... the list goes on and on. But this morning, there is a particular fear I want to address ... and that is the fear each of us has when it comes to our money ... and the sharing of our resources.

If Jesus was sitting with you today and you turned and asked him, “How much of my money should I give to the church?” ... what do you think he would tell you ... or would he even give you a direct answer?

To set the stage for our Gospel reading ... Jesus has been brought before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate by the religious authorities ... and he is asked one of those direct questions ... but the question seems to point more at the fear in Pilate’s own heart.

Listen with your hearts as we hear the word of our Lord on this Christ the King Sunday from John 18:33-37.

18:33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

18:34 Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

18:35 Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

18:36 Jesus answered, "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."

18:37 Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Okay ... let's get it over with ... here's my stewardship joke for 2009 ... One day the Butterball Turkey Co. got a phone call from a lady who had a one-year turkey sitting in her freezer. She asked if it is good to eat. The Customer Service clerk said, it is OK to eat, but it will be dry and not taste as good. So the lady told the Butterball Turkey representative, "Good, I will donate it to the church then."

We get a lot of such donations at the church ... maybe not year-old frozen turkeys ... but plenty of gifts that might be considered leftovers . . . because the fact is, most good Presbyterians ... give what they can based out of their fears. "I will give to the church," but only after I see what's leftover ... from my bills ... from my mortgage or rent ... from that holiday trip ... from car payments ... only what's left over from all the things that I must pay first."

That's giving out of fear ... fear that if I give too much to the church ... there won't be enough left for me to do all the other things that I want to do and buy.

Yet ... in our gospel reading this morning ... Jesus, who should be filled with fear for his very life ... stands just as calm as he can before the powerful Roman governor Pontius Pilate. There toe-to toe ... stands a mighty Roman leader ... with all of the power and might attached to his name ... and Jesus ... a non-anxious presence.

The life of Jesus rests in this man's hands ... if Jesus says the right thing, he might just be let go. But when Pilate asks him the second time, "So you are a king?" ... Jesus doesn't give him a direct answer ... Jesus is not the one who is afraid ... Jesus isn't the one who stands to lose all of his power and prestige.

And Jesus simply witnesses that he came into this world to testify to the truth ... a truth offered to anyone listening to his voice.

So what is that truth ... “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” ... “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” ...

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" ...

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

I could go on and on and on. But the truth was spoken ... spoken by the Lord ... just as when the word of God blew across the waters and created the world out of chaos ... so the same word ... the word of Jesus Christ ... the Logos ... exploded into the world and nothing since has ever been the same again.

So ... if you ask Jesus ... what should I give to the church ... what do you want me to share out of my wealth ... what is he telling you to do this morning? Can you hear the truth? Can you hear his words in the midst of your own anxieties and fears?

Are you only promising to give from what is left over? Or are you willing to step forward in faith and share the first fruits of your blessings? It's a tough choice ... and each of us must make it.

I want to suggest to you that there are two types of giving ... **charitable** giving and **harvest** giving. I recently read* that charitable giving, the usual form church stewardship takes, is when members look at their available funds after bills are paid, make an assessment of value, and give accordingly. This is actually the same as “left over giving.”

In this case, the church ends up competing with every other worthwhile cause and organization in your life ... from symphony tickets to cancer research.

However, harvest giving is grounded in the biblical principle that everything we have comes from God and that it is our solemn obligation to give back to God out of the first fruits of our harvest.

And that actually means that we give first to God ... and then pay the bills and other obligations of our lives. That's probably not easy for most of us ... it's not the way we're used to doing things when it comes to our money. It's fearful.

But I believe it will change you ... it will change the way you look at your treasures in this world ... your money ... it will become less of an object to hold onto ... and more of a means to share with others.

*Tom Ehrich founder of the Church Wellness Project, www.churchwellness.com.

And because of that ... my prayer for you and is for our church is a season of harvest giving. No one in the church is going to know what you hope to give in the coming year. We're only asking you to please write an amount on the faith promise portion of the yellow card ... and then to place that part of the card up here on the communion table.

Your faith promise ... what you hope to share out of your money in the coming year ... is strictly between you and your Lord. So whether or not you have pledged in the past or not ... please turn in a faith promise card ... Because from these cards, your elders will discern what we are able to do in work and mission in the coming year here at Columbia Presbyterian Church ... as God leads us.

Listen to these closing words from Henri Nouwen ... "In our contemporary society, with its emphasis on accomplishment and success, we often live as if being productive is the same as being fruitful. Productivity gives us certain notoriety and helps take away our fear of being useless. But if we want to live as followers of Jesus, we must come to know that products, successes, and results often belong more to the house of fear than to the house of love. Henri Nouwen *Life Signs*.

Let us pray:

What gift can we bring, what present, what token?

What words can convey it, the joy of this day?

When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,

what song can we offer in honor and praise?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.