

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“A New Kind of King”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Christ the King--November 25, 2018

Lessons: Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37

On this the final Sunday in the liturgical year, we are invited to consider Jesus' understanding of power and how it differs from our own. In the gospel lesson today, Jesus stands before Pilate. For most people, Pilate would seem to be the one with power. He is the emperor's representative in Jerusalem. He has the power to release or crucify Jesus. He commands the army in that region. By all our usual standards, Pilate is the one with power. And Jesus doesn't seem to have power. He is a prisoner. He has been handed over. There is a large crowd outside who are calling for his death, yet in this story it is clear that it is Jesus and not Pilate who actually has power. Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from this world." It doesn't consist on what you see around you. Jesus' kingdom, Jesus' understanding of power is something completely different.

Now this passage has sometimes been misunderstood. When Jesus says that his kingdom is not from this world, sometimes people assume that Christianity has nothing really to say in the realm of everyday living. Go to church on Sunday, but don't expect the faith to affect my business decisions or the decisions of government or the events of my life from Monday to Saturday. At its extreme this misunderstanding gets played out by those who say that our constitutional understanding of the separation of church and state means that the church should not be involved with the matters of the state. Yet Jesus here is not suggesting that he or his followers have no role to play in human affairs. Instead, Jesus' understanding of faith and power is something completely different. Jesus here distinguishes his rule from the various forms of power that mark most earthly institutions. Domination, violence, and economic exploitation are common weapons for maintaining power, but Jesus' power derives from a different source. Jesus' power is not based on force; if his kingdom were from this world, his servants would be fighting to save him, as any army would fight to save its leader. But Jesus proclaims a whole new understanding of power. Power actually can be found in what many would call weakness.

Jesus never sought power as it is most often understood and when people tried to give it to him, he turned it down. In the wilderness when he was tempted by the devil, one of the temptations was that the devil would give Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world if he would just worship the devil. Instead of having to go out and preach and call disciples and create a following, Jesus could take command right then. Yet he turned it down because God's realm is not something that can be forced on anyone. It isn't based on our usual understanding of power. It is based on love; it is based on what many would call weakness. Paul explained this magnificently in his letter to the Philippians: Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and God highly exalted him. He has an entirely different understanding of power. Some of you may know a little piece about Jesus that again describes this new understanding of power called *One Solitary Life*: "He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery

of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. [Not what we would call a powerful life.] Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of [humankind's] progress. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected [human life] on this earth as much as that one solitary life."¹

We still sometimes think that power lies in Washington or in Dover or on Wall Street or down at City Hall, but Jesus proclaims that real power is to be found elsewhere. It isn't ever forced; it is based on the power of love. We've seen the truth of this in the lives of people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, Ghandi, and Nelson Mandela. I think too of the story of Sojourner Truth; on the surface it would be difficult to find a less powerful woman: she was an illiterate, former slave, yet she had the presence to take on the world in her support of abolition and the rights of women. You'll remember how she took on some powerful male preachers who suggested that women can't have the same rights as men because Christ wasn't a woman. She is reported to have said: "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a Woman! Man had nothing to do with him!"² Real power is found in surprising places.

Henri Nouwen offers another example of this understanding of power. Nouwen was an extraordinary Dutch Roman Catholic priest who taught at Yale and Harvard and wrote lots of books about ministry and the spiritual life. You'll often hear me quote from his works. Yet in the midst of his notoriety, he felt a certain restlessness. So he left the University behind and became a priest at a school for the mentally handicapped, a community called Daybreak, near Toronto. According to John Killinger, Nouwen found the change to be staggering. "For twenty years, he had been admired and respected for his academic qualifications, his books, his knowledge of the modern world. At Daybreak, no one cared about any of this. Now the only thing that mattered was how he related to the special children in the school--whether they liked him and he could communicate with them. He felt naked and powerless." Yet Nouwen said that this was the most important experience of his life, because it forced him to rediscover his true identity. "These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self--the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things--and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of my accomplishments."³

During this time, Nouwen was asked to deliver a series of lectures at the Center for Human Development in Washington, D.C. He told those people in Washington that the Christian leader of the future is called to be "completely irrelevant" and to stand before her or his constituents "with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self." This is the way Jesus came among us, not with power and position, not yearning to be known by all the world or to alter human destiny, but with simplicity and humility and love.

Because he was a member of the Daybreak community, Nouwen submitted himself to the same rules that the students lived by. One rule was that no one went anywhere or did anything without discussing it with the others and receiving their input. And another rule was that people did things in pairs. If you went some place, you took someone with you. So Nouwen invited Bill Van Buren to accompany him to Washington. When Nouwen was introduced for his first lecture, he noticed that young Bill had left his seat and was following Nouwen up to the speaker's platform. Bill was taking

¹ James A. Francis, *One Solitary Life*.

² Sojourner Truth, *Ain't I a Woman?* December 1851 Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus, Reflections on Christian Leadership*. Crossroad Publishing Company. © 1989.

this togetherness a little more literally than Nouwen had expected. When Nouwen finished a page of his lecture and laid it aside, Bill would come up and get it and lay it in a neat stack on the table.

When Nouwen finished the lecture, Bill said: "Henri, can I say something now?" Nouwen was startled. His first reaction was to say no, because he knew that Bill, once he began, could talk almost interminably. But he caught himself in the presumption that Bill had nothing important to say to that audience and invited him to speak. Bill simply thanked the center for including him, and everyone stood and gave him a round of applause. It was a wonderfully touching moment, and it had underscored as nothing else could the words of Nouwen's lecture. Real leadership, Christian leadership, is open, vulnerable and sharing.

Today we celebrate the reign of Jesus, whose kingdom is not from this world; it is not based on violence or coercion or manipulation. It is based on the real power of love.

Let us pray: In the midst of all our own striving after power, help us dear God, to discover what real power is all about, and thereby give of ourselves in service to the world, following the example of Jesus Christ, our sovereign. Amen.