You\_Have\_No\_Power, Tim Keller

The scripture reading for tonight is found in John chapters 18 verses 33 through 38 and chapters 19 8 through 11.

33Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” 34“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” 35“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied, “it was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” 36Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews, but now my kingdom is from another place.” 37“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You were right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” 38“What is truth?” Pilate asked. With this, he went out again to the Jews and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.”

8When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, 9and he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?”, he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. 10“Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” 11Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.” This is the word of the Lord.

Tuesday: Opening

In the weeks up to Easter, the world over, Christians spend time thinking about the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ, and we are going to be spending our weeks looking at what the gospel writer John says about the last hours of Jesus' life, and we began that last week. And here we come to what all four gospel writers present, and that is the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate, Pontius Pilate. And there's a lot of ways to look at, or I shouldn't say a lot of ways, there's a lot of things in this text that we could spend some time on.

Notice, for example, at the bottom, it says something very interesting we'll get back to in another regard, where Pilate says, I've got power to crucify you, and Jesus says, the only power you've got is given to you because it's part of a plan. See? He says, yeah, I'm going to get crucified, but even though you think it's your idea, but actually it's part of God's plan. He's the one who's given you the power to do it. And yet, he then says, and therefore, the ones who handed me over are more guilty of sin than you are. And you know what that is saying? On the one hand, it's saying everything is under God's control. Everything's happening according to plan. If you do something, it's because God had it in His plan. And yet, your motivation, how deliberate, for example, he's saying, Pilate is not as deliberate in his hostility to Jesus as some of the other religious leaders. And what he's saying is, the religious leaders who are more deliberate, and they're more intentional, they're more hostile, they're going to be more guilty than you, but you're going to be guilty, too. Here we have the Bible saying, what it says over and over again, that God is completely in control, and yet you are still responsible for your behavior. Everything that happens, every choice you make is part of His plan, and yet, you are responsible for the choice. Over and over and over again. Isn't that interesting? Would you like a whole sermon on that? No.

Or for example, in the very beginning... No, well, some other time. Come on. I'm sorry. Hey, this isn't a democracy right now. Okay, all right.

Or for example, in the very beginning, when the interrogation begins, and Pilate says, are you the king of the Jews? Jesus says, is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me? What? And what he's saying is, are you asking me this because other people have told you you need to ask me this, or are you interested for yourself? And what we have here, a couple of places in this interrogation is Jesus trying to go after Pilate personally, trying to say, this is something that you should be taking personally. Don't talk about me as an abstraction. What do you think? Where do you stand with regard to me? That's also another way to preach this sermon, and that is that the fact that Christianity shouldn't be an abstraction. It has to be something that's very personal, something that you have to decide where you stand with Jesus, but we're not going to preach that sermon either.

Probably, I'm going to preach the sermon that you least want to hear, but I think this is really what the text is about. This is a confrontation of Jesus Christ with political power. Pilate represented the Roman Empire, which was the greatest political power that the world had ever known up to that time. And the reason all the gospel writers are telling us about this is because the gospels, the Bible wants to teach us something about how Christianity relates to political power. And I would think that in an election year, that's actually of some interest.

And that's how we're going to look at this text because I think that's mainly what it's about. And we're going to learn here the limits, when it comes to political power, the limits, the problem, and the transformation of power. The limits, the problem and the transformation of power.

Wednesday: Limits

First, the limits, when Jesus is asked, are you king of the Jews? Pilate is not actually asking a theological question. He's really not interested on whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, according to the scriptures. What he's actually asking is, are you a political leader? Are you leading a political movement? Are you someone who's trying to undermine Roman power?

Now, political power is the power to make people do things. That's what political power is. It's the power to make people do things. If you pass laws, enforce laws, you can make people behave through the law. And political office, governing office, makes people do things. That's what political power is all about. And Jesus says in this passage two things.

First, you see, his answer to Pilate is ambiguous. In verse 36, he seems to say, no, I'm not a king. In verse 37, he says, I am a king. In verse 36, he says, I'm not a king because I'm not of this world. But then in verse 37, he says, I am a king, and I'm coming into this world. This is deliberately ambiguous because the answer is so sophisticated, and here's what it is. On the one hand, he says, I am not a political leader. If I were, my servants would fight. And when he says my servants would fight, he's not just talking about physical aggression. When Jesus says to Peter, put away your sword. Don't draw the sword in my name. You must keep in mind that in the Bible, the word sword means political power. The power of the sword is the power the magistrate has to put you in prison, to pass laws, to penalize you if you don't do what the magistrate says. And what Jesus is saying is, I don't want anyone drawing the sword in my name. He says, my kingdom is not being moved forward through political power. I don't want my servants to take political power. I don't want them to fight. No one should ever wage war in Jesus' name. No one should ever even rule and say, this is a

Christian government. We're making you live like Christians because we're governing in Jesus' name. Jesus says, no, I don't want my servants to do it that way.

Now, some of you are saying, hmm, some people have though, haven't they? And the answer is, oh, yeah. In fact, listen, in Asia, Latin America, and Africa today, Christianity is growing at many times, many times faster than the population. And in North America, it's sort of holding its own. But the only place in the world, the only continent in the world in which Christianity is in retreat, where the churches are empty, where the people have turned away from it, where it has actually no power or vitality, is Europe. And that's the only place in the world where they've tried an experiment for 1,000 years called Christendom. And in Christendom, what they were doing was they were going against John 18. And what they were doing was they had state churches. These were churches that were supported by the power of the sword, by taxes, by laws. These were churches that, in order to make into the upper echelons of power in that society, you had to be in those churches. In other words, you had to be a Christian. You had to live like a Christian. You had to do it. The political power was behind it. And as a result, the masses were alienated. The churches lost its power. There were generations of nominal Christians, people that had to go to church in order to get to power. And when the church gets into bed with power, it loses its genius, which is that the church has always done better on the margins because it's not founded by a strong person who took power, but by, as we're going to see here in a second, a weak person who gave up power. And as a result, it just never does very well when you do that, when you get it into bed with power.

And Lamensane up here at Yale University, who's an African theologian and teaches missions at Yale, says that 200 or 300 years from now, when Christianity is continuing to really become a truly universal faith, people from all tongue tribes, people in nations, he says, we'll look back at the European idea where we disregarded John 18 and we'll say, that didn't work very well, did it?

So, first of all, Jesus is saying, no, I'm not a political leader, and I don't want people ruling and going to war and taking up the sword in my name. But, he says, I am a king, and I have come to bear witness to the truth. And I'm coming into the world to bear witness to the truth.

And what he's saying here is, I am here to change the way people actually live in the world. I'm not of their worldly in the sense of, oh, Christianity is something that just gives you peace and joy and groovy vibes in your private life, and it doesn't really... Groovy vibes? You don't know what that means? It's a matter with you, people under the age of 40. That Christianity is just this other worldly thing that's just good for your private life, and it doesn't affect the way people actually live in the world? Jesus is not granting that. Jesus says, I have come to bear witness to the truth, and that actually is what really does influence the way people live in the world.

Let me give you an example. If you can get in a time machine and go back to 1908, 100 years, or if you lived in 1908, and you're in America here, and let's just say you came to the conclusion that women were being terrorized in public space, in the workplace, and sexual harassment was a terrible problem, and you decided, I'm going to pass laws against sexual harassment in my state. 1908. Good luck. Go ahead. Try. And even if you got it through, and you almost certainly wouldn't, because people would say, what? What are you talking about? This is just the way things are. You know, not only would they probably never... it would never have gotten through, but if it got through, it would have been disregarded, and here's the reason why. Before those laws could be passed, which eventually they were, people's minds had to be changed. Something more fundamental had to happen. Their worldview had to change. Their understanding of what the truth was had to change. And the law, therefore, the political, you see, political power, which enforces laws and forces people to do things, actually can only come after much more fundamental changes have happened.

It can't really change people. It can't really change society. It's truth that changes society. People's understanding of the truth that changes it. And the law just comes along later to kind of finish the process.

And Jesus is saying, I'm coming into the world not as a political leader because that's limited in what you can do. I'm coming with the truth, and that will really change the way life is lived in the world. And it did. Why? Because the early Christian community was shaped by the gospel truth, and it changed the way people lived, and that actually did change the Roman Empire. Oh, it did.

For example, early Christian communities, on the one hand, looked more conservative than the surrounding culture. When it came to sex and family, the early Christian community, by the way, was one of the first groups of people in the world that decided abortion was wrong. And they also thought, which is very linked here, female infanticide was wrong. See, in those days in the Roman world, parents could kill their children if they wanted to. It was their right. And when you had a child, when a child was born, if you didn't want the child, you could literally throw it out into the field or under the street to die of exposure. And that usually was something that was done to female babies because women were not as economically valuable to the family. And female infanticide was so widespread that historians will tell you that around the time when the church was getting started, there were 140 males for every hundred females in the Roman Empire. And the Christian church said, no.

And not only that, the Christian church said, no sex outside marriage for anyone. In the pagan world, wives could not have dalliances, wives could not have affairs, wives could not have sex with anyone but their husbands. But their husbands, that was different. You know, husbands could have mistresses, husbands could have affairs. It was a double standard. And the Christian church said, no double standard, no sex outside of marriage for anyone. And guess what? Inside the Christian church, because of these rules, families flourished, families grew. And by the way, women flocked to the Christian church because they realized they were safe there. They realized they were protected there.

But on the other hand, the early Christian communities look more liberal than the surrounding culture. Oh, yeah. Why? Because the gospel truth changed the way in which they related to each other. And the gospel truth was everybody's a sinner saved by grace, the great equalizer. Everyone is equal before the foot of the cross. We're all sinners saved by grace. And that meant that Christians combined people and mixed people between the classes, between the races, that in respectable society, Roman society, it just wasn't done. And middle-class and upper-class Christians radically gave of their income to their brothers and sisters around them. See, when it came to sex, the Christian church seemed a lot more conservative than the surrounding culture. When it came to money and race and power, it was much more liberal than the surrounding culture.

But here's what was interesting. In all ways, the Christian communities were more attractive than the surrounding culture because one historian puts it like this. This is talking about the early church. To cities filled with the homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as a real hope. To cities filled with widows and orphans, Christianity offered a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. What Christianity brought was not simply a spiritual movement but a whole new culture, a counterculture, an alternate way of being a human society.

And to everybody looking in, except the people at the very top, that counterculture was more attractive than the dominant culture. And this is the reason that by the time that Constantine came along, and there's a whole lot of people that would say, oh, Constantine, the emperor Constantine 300 AD or so, he came along and he started being supportive of Christianity. Ah, you see, he put Christians into power. That's just not true. Christianity was already overwhelming the empire, not in numbers necessarily. You understand, Christianity stayed a minority. Most Romans weren't Christians, but they continually adopted the Christian approach to things, the Christian approach to relationships, the Christian approach to the poor, the Christian approach to sexuality and family was so attractive, so life-giving that the Roman society slowly became less brutal and a far better place to live because why? Jesus bore witness to the truth, and the Christians bore witness to the truth, and they changed people's minds, and they changed people's worldviews. And political power is always downstream of that kind of power. It always... political change happens after all that happens. Constantine was just backing a winning horse. He just wanted to get on the bandwagon.

Now, what do you see here?

What Jesus Christ is saying is not that there's something... you know, he's not just saying, like some people, have nothing to do with political power, nor on the other hand is he saying political power is the way to go. Are you a king of the Jews? Yes and no. Are you a king? Yeah and no. Are you having a political impact on the world? Yeah and no. I am not a political leader at all, and yet I'm going to have an enormous impact on the way in which people actually live. So, first of all, we see here the limits of political power.

Thursday

Secondly, even more profoundly, we're told here the problem with political power. Now, that comes at the end of the first interrogation in a famous place where Jesus says, I'm of the truth, and anyone who's for me is on the side of the truth. And Pilate looks at him and just laughs and says, what is truth? And doesn't stay for an answer. What is he saying? Truth? What in the world does truth have to do with power? I don't care about truth. I don't care about theology. All I care about is, are you a threat to power? Are you a threat to my power and the power of Rome?

What does that show? That shows what happens to the human heart ordinarily in the presence of power.

There is an amazing speech that was delivered by Vaclav Havel in 1991, who at the time was the president of Czechoslovakia. And you can find it online very, very easily. In fact, I suggest everybody read it. I mean it. It's amazingly candid. And it's basically, it's called, if you just put in there Havel, H-A-V-E-L, and you put in temptations of political power. That's what the speech is about. It was an acceptance speech to an award he was getting. Temptations of political power. Here's what he says in that speech, which is absolutely astounding. He says, everybody who seeks political office, everybody who seeks governing office has two motivations in the heart. The one motivation is, I want to use power in the service of truth. I want to use power, I want power so I can serve truth and other people. Because you go into political office, you can think, I can think of ways to organize society better than it's organized now. And I want to implement my ideas. Okay. So, I want truth in service. I want power to be in the service of truth.

The other motivation, he says, is you don't want power just to serve the truth. You also want power as an end in itself. You want power to fill the deep need that every human heart has for self-affirmation. And he says some things that are absolutely amazing here. He says, listen carefully, he's talking about himself. He says, every human being has an inner longing for self-affirmation. Every human being has a need to prove that you mean something and that, therefore, you exist. Nothing does that better than political office. Political office is the way to affirm to the world and to yourself that through the gaining of power and of that power's reach, that you have an undeniable identity. It's a guarantee that you exist in a truly valid and significant way.

Now, listen, here's what he says. When you seek political office, you have both those motives in the heart. He knows from experience. You both want power as a means to an end to serve others in the truth, but you also want power as an end in itself to fill that need that you have to convince yourself you're a significant person. And he says, virtually everybody, when they're seeking political office, only admits to themselves and other people they only have the first motive. They won't admit they have the second motive. They don't seem to know they have the second motive. But he says, if you get into political office and you have both those motives, and you don't know you have the second motive, the second motive will overcome the first. You will hold on to power whether you're getting anything done in your office or not. You'll hold on to power whether you're getting your legislation ahead or not. You'll hold on to power whether you decide your ideas work or not. You need the power. You hold on to the power. It serves as an end in itself. Why? Because there's an inner emptiness.

You need the honor. You need the glory, and you hold on to it no matter what.

And he says, it's inevitable that the second overtakes the first unless you're absolutely vigilant for it. And almost nobody is. And this is the reason why power is abused. He actually says this, “There is something treacherous, delusive, and ambiguous in this temptation of power. Politics, therefore, should only be carried on by people who are absolutely vigilant and sensitive to the ambiguous promise of self-affirmation that always comes with it.”

Here's what he's saying. He is not saying some poor, needy people whose mommy and daddy didn't love them, when they get into office, they become power-hungry. No, he's saying every human being is empty inside and needs someone, something to come along and fill it with significance and honor and glory. And if you have that emptiness and you get near power, you will fill that vacuum with the power. And that's the reason power is abused, because power becomes a means, not a means to serve others, but an end in itself, something you hold on to no matter what. And he says, it's happening all over the place. And he is absolutely right.

Do you know there's a place in Galatians, a book of Galatians, where Paul says, don't be conceited, stop exploiting each other. And that word ‘conceited’ literally is a word that means don't be so empty of glory. It's a word, kinodoxo, which means empty of glory, empty of worth. There's a vacuum inside, a hole. And you exploit others, you try to get power to fill the hole.

Friday

Have you ever seen parents trying real hard to get their little kids to behave? And you know, it's so hard when the kids are growing up, they're about 6, 7, 8 years old, and you're trying to get them to tell the truth, you're trying to get them to share their toys, you're trying to get them to do everything and be virtuous, and it always seems to be a losing battle. And then all of a sudden, one of your kids does it just right. And when that happens, you can see it. The parent's face lights up and says something like, that's my girl, or that's my boy. And when the child sees that delight on the face, the child squeals and jumps into the parent's arms and drinks deeply. There's nothing more satisfying than seeing delight on the face of the mother or the father. And the Bible says, you were built to get that from God. Every human being was built to get that from God. We're built to be his sons and his daughters. And if we don't have it, and we don't have it, and you get near power, you're going to use power to fill it up, and it'll become a means to an end, and therefore, it will be abused. You will abuse it, and you won't even admit that you're doing it.

What will change that? What will transform power into a tool that you actually give away to empower others, a tool that you use to serve others, instead of an armor, a suit of armor that you put on to convince yourself and everybody else that you're significant? How do we transform power? The answer is, at the end of the first interrogation, Jesus said, the reason I've come into this world is to bear witness for the truth, right? What is that? But how is he going to do it? Just by being a teacher? Oh, you must know better than that. At the end of the second interrogation, Pilate says, I have the power to crucify you. And what does Jesus say? You only have that power because that's the plan. That's how I'm going to bear witness to the truth. You only have power because it's the plan that I die.

Do you want to know that the Father, the Lord, utterly delights in you? When you see Jesus Christ not coming to take power and to take glory, but to empty himself of his glory and to empty himself of his power, die on the cross for you, there and only there will you actually have that absolute assurance of his delight in you. And when that gets into your heart and to the degree that it fills your heart, to that degree now, now, it's safe for you to go into political office.

Do you think that Christianity is trying to say, oh, we don't want Christians to be in politics? Of course not. Christians should never get up and say, you know, I'm a Christian and therefore, non-Trinitarians, all into the brink. You don't believe in the Trinity. Okay. See, that's what Jesus is saying, that's a great way to destroy Christianity in your country. But what I do want is I want people who now have their hearts filled to now move out into the political office and start to give away power the way Jesus did. Use power instead of putting it on. Now it's safe to use it. To do your very best to make this a good place to live. And not only that, every person, whether you're in political office or not, who's got heart filled with the knowledge of what Jesus Christ has done, if you no longer are selfish in sexuality but faithful, if you're no longer selfish with your money but you're generous, you're going to be out there changing the world through your witness to the truth.

You know what's amazing? This assurance that Jesus is basically giving us. Pilate says at the very end, I am Rome. I have power and I could crush you like a bug. And you know what Jesus says? There is a George Herbert poem in which the words of the Christian or Christ go like this:

Spare not, do thy worst. You shall only make me better than I was before and you shall make yourself so much less that you will be no more.

And here's what Jesus is saying. You don't realize this is all part of the plan. If you abuse power, you're just going to bring your own house down. Go ahead. Try to destroy me. And all you'll do is put me on a cross and make me the savior of the world. And all you will do is put me up there as an emblem and a sign and a token and a power in the lives of people who eventually are going to turn your entire Roman world upside down. By you abusing your power, you are helping me show the world what power is for, giving, serving, giving away.

Come on. Isn't that an amazing assurance? It's close to the Job thing, where God only allowed so much bad stuff into Job's life that it actually accomplished the opposite of what Satan wanted. And here's what Jesus Christ is saying. If God gives anyone the power to do something bad to you, serve, love, follow Jesus because all it will do in the end is accomplish the very opposite of what the person wants to do. Okay? Real power is service.

Follow him.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you've given us such a sophisticated and nuanced approach to politics, that on the one hand, we are not seeking to rule in Jesus' name. That would be so wrong. But on the other hand, once we have Jesus' name in the center of our heart, it's safe for us to rule. It's safe for us to come in and seek to give away power and to serve other people and to love our neighbors the way Jesus loved them and to love our opponents the way Jesus loved them. Oh, Father, we pray, Lord, that you would help us to work out in our lives as we care for the poor, as we live lives of justice and peace, and use the power that we have because of the joy in our hearts through the gospel in a way that really helps other people. We pray that you'd help us to work out what it really means to be Christians in the public world. And it's so complicated. It's so much less pat and well laid out than to say, stay away from politics or bring the kingdom through politics. Instead, we thank you for the sophisticated, nuanced, balanced, and in the end, gospel approach that calls us to walk in the footsteps of the one who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many in his name we pray, amen.