

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Who Reigns in Your Life?

Lesson: John 18:33-37, New International Version

³³ Pilate 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. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" ³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." ³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

The church calendar differs slightly from the calendar we use in daily life. While December is typically a time for wrapping up the year and January is seen as a fresh start, the church calendar is organized around liturgical seasons: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Today marks the final Sunday in the church calendar, often called Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday.

This Sunday invites us to reflect on important questions: "Who reigns over our lives?" "What drives us and shapes our decisions?" "Are our desires aligned with God's will?"

Unlike previous years, this winter has been unusually mild so far, with little snow. The snow on the past Wednesday might have been only the second snowfall of the season. But as temperatures drop and the winds grow stronger, it seems Wisconsin is beginning to reveal its true winter beauty.

For some, winter brings excitement as they look forward to skiing, tubing, or snowmobiling, or anticipate family gatherings, Christmas celebrations, and holiday festivities. Yet for others, winter can feel isolating, with long, dark nights and snow-covered roads fostering loneliness or health concerns. Bad news from the world around us may increase anxiety and fear about the future.

Although we confess our faith in God, when worries and hardships come our way, we feel uneasy, and our hearts are easily shaken. Instead of trusting and

leaning on God, we sometimes rely on our own connections, resources, or plans to solve our problems.

Christ the King Sunday calls us to ask: “In every situation, what do we rely on?” “Who or what sits at the center of our lives?”

In John 18, we meet a man named Pilate. Yes, this is the same Pontius Pilate we recite in the Apostles’ Creed. Pilate was a Roman governor, hailing from the powerful and influential Pontius family. His role was to oversee Judea, a province under Roman rule. The name Pilate comes from the Latin word for “armed one,” reflecting his background as a man of power and military might. Pilate was well-versed in worldly governance and deeply entangled in secular interests. He believed that force and violence were the only ways to maintain control and authority.

Though Pilate had achieved much in life, he was deeply driven by a hunger for more success and the approval of the Roman Emperor. This ambition shaped his decisions and left little room for moral conviction. To gain the Emperor's favor, Pilate needed to demonstrate his ability to rule the region of Judea effectively, using his power and military might. He sought to avoid unnecessary complications and aimed to prevent significant conflicts with the local people.

One day, the Jewish religious leaders accused Jesus and brought Him before Pilate. However, to Pilate, judging Jesus was nothing more than an inconvenient task that held no benefit for his career. Therefore, he told the Jewish leaders to judge Jesus according to their laws. But they wanted to execute Jesus, and at that time, Jewish religious law did not permit the death penalty. So they accused Jesus not only of blasphemy but also of being a political rebel.

Knowing that the Jewish leaders wanted to put Jesus to death, Pilate began to question Him. What Pilate heard from Jesus was about truth—something Pilate could not understand—and about a kingdom not of this world. Pilate found no reason to condemn Jesus. Although Pilate's primary concern was achieving success, he hesitated to sentence an innocent man to death without justification. At the same time, he worried about damaging his relationship

with the Jewish religious leaders if he refused to execute Jesus. Pilate found himself at a crossroads, forced to choose between doing God's will and his endless desire for success.

Pilate's struggle mirrors the struggles we often face. Like him, we are sometimes torn between God's will and our own desires for security or success. It's not always easy to choose God's path when we're weighed down by life's burdens and decisions.

So, friends, I ask you: What do you rely on in moments of uncertainty? Who or what is at the center of your life?

Pilate didn't choose to save Jesus because his heart was consumed by a desire for power and the approval of the Emperor. He placed his trust in earthly strength and authority. In contrast, Jesus stood before Pilate with confidence, declaring, "My kingdom is not of this world." Jesus is a king who reigns with humility, sacrifice, and love. His kingdom is not built on weapons but on grace and truth. Jesus told Pilate that He came to testify to the truth. This truth sets us free and empowers us to live as God's people.

Pilate compromised to fulfill his ambitions, but Jesus remained steadfast, even to the point of death on a cross. Jesus gave His life for us, and through His sacrifice, the promise of salvation was fulfilled. The difference between Pilate and Jesus reflects the vast difference between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. Earthly kingdoms speak of peace while striving to arm themselves. However, the Kingdom of God is ruled and expanded through love, justice, and peace. Yes, friends. In the kingdom where Jesus reigns as King, all our fears and worries are embraced and transformed into love, peace, and joy. He is the true King who brings comfort in our struggles and hope in our despair.

Today, as in Pilate's time, we face choices. Will we rely on worldly power and success, or will we trust in God's presence and promises?

Friends, who is at the center of your life? Is it your own desires or Jesus Christ? Is Jesus simply a name you hear in church, or is He the King who brings true peace and hope to your heart?

Living as Christians in this world and trusting in God at life's crossroads means following Jesus and practicing His love and service in our daily lives. Christ's leadership is not about power or dominance but about sacrifice, humility, and meeting the needs of others.

I want to leave you with three questions. Reflect on these questions in the coming week, constantly examining where you stand and who reigns in your life as you prepare for Thanksgiving and the Season of Advent:

The first question is "Whom do I serve?"

We must recognize who or what guides our lives. As followers of Christ, we are called to serve God's will by loving our neighbors and communities, both within and beyond the church.

The second question is "How am I responding to God's voice?"

In every moment, we are called to listen for God's voice through Scripture, prayer, and the community of faith. Even in trials, we must strive to hear His guidance and proclaim hope.

The third question is "What is at the center of my life?"

Rather than pursuing worldly success, we are called to center our lives on Jesus, humbling ourselves and loving others as He loved us. When we root ourselves deeply in God, we find unshakable peace, no matter the circumstances.

Jesus is not just a source of comfort; He is the true King who leads our lives. He is with us in our struggles, calling us to expand His kingdom through our choices and faith.

So today, friends, who sits at the center of your life? My hope and prayer are that we may all welcome God into the center of our hearts, find peace and hope in Him, and live as citizens of His kingdom. Amen.