

Last Pentecost (Proper 29) – Year B – November 22, 2009
2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-19; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37
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In 2005, the K through grade 2 children of Mary S. Babcock school, put together a collection of their poems on the question of “What does belonging mean?” The teacher clearly gave all the students the same first line reading, “Be kind to everyone.” The children took it from there, and in their wisdom came up with some insightful poems. This is what Sam says, “Be kind to everyone, each other’s hearts belong, listen, ... no fighting, give each other space.” Paige wrote, “Be kind to everyone, explore new things together, look out for each other, offer kindness and understanding... give a helping hand.” Today’s Gospel reading does not take place in a schoolroom, but in a courtroom. Yet the real trial is about the question, “to which world do you belong?”

Jesus is standing before Pilate, an innocent man, bound and under trial for his life. Even as the appointed governor, Pilate really doesn’t belong in Judea or in this awkward position as Jesus’ judge. However, due diligence requires that Pilate at least make some effort to understand why Jesus has been sent to him by the Judean leaders. Assuming that Jesus is an insurrectionist, who is directly challenging the authority of Caesar and Roman rule, Pilate asks Him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Except that from the Greek sentence structure, the emphasis is heavily on the word “you”, such that a better way to hear the question and unspoken thought behind it might be, “You have got to be kidding me, are **YOU** *really* the King of the Jews?” Well obviously, appearances can be deceptive, and the whole scene is dripping with incredulity and irony. Nonetheless, Jesus immediately takes charge by asking how Pilate comes to stand before Him asking such a question. We would expect no less from Jesus, but perhaps Pilate was wondering who is really on trial at this hearing. Jesus’ question matters because if Pilate is asking on his own behalf, the question is really about determining whether Jesus is a rival to Caesar, and the answer is “No”. On the other hand, if Pilate is asking on behalf of information received from the Judean leaders, the question defines Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. Pilate admits that it is the Judean leaders who have handed over Jesus. That translation sounds a little bit nicer, even though “handed over” is the same Greek word used to describe Judas’ betrayal of Jesus.

Jesus then talks about His kingdom: a kingdom that is not of this world. The kingdom of God is so very different from anything that the world has to offer. Yet, because it is of God in Christ, it is more real than anything we normally perceive with our five senses. The kingdom of God is an inward and spiritual truth, manifest outwardly in the lives of Christians through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is everywhere Christ the King reigns, and where all followers of Christ belong. There are still plenty of people in the world who turn tail and run at the mere thought of God’s kingdom.

Did you ever want to run away as a child, or maybe even as an adult? Perhaps you actually did, and not just by packing a bag and leaving. I recently read that for many years the prevailing wisdom in dealing with runaway children was to talk with them about their frustrations, and then guide them toward the logical conclusion that they wouldn’t survive in the big bad world. More recently, that advice has changed dramatically. Nowadays parents of runaways are advised to tell their children “No. You may not run away, because we belong to one another, and that despite being angry or upset, when people belong to one another, they stay with one another.” You and I are children too, children of God, and part of an extended family in this community of faith. Whatever we may be feeling or experiencing in relationship, we are united, and bound to one another in Christ’s body. There is nowhere we can run, and nowhere we can hide from God, or from God’s grace. Running away is just child’s play compared to the hard work of building lasting and meaningful relationships. According to Susan Lieberman, “By building relations[h]ips we create a source of love and personal pride and belonging that makes living in a chaotic world easier.”

Jesus came into the world to testify to the truth. A major portion of that truth is that Jesus came

into the world to reconcile us to God. As disciples of Christ, it is our job to be about the same work of reconciliation in Christ's name. Each week in our corporate prayers, we pray for the whole church, made real through faith and in baptism, and strengthened through the Eucharistic feast. Whatever the real or imagined divisions or disagreements of any imperfect human institution, and whatever forces seek to rend our unity as the Body of Christ, the bottom line is that in Christ, we belong together. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:4-6) we read, "There is one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Pilate cannot get past the mundane and superficial business of the moment. In his own mind, there is only one pressing reality, which is the fear of losing his tenuous position of power. He cannot see beyond himself, or conceive that all power comes from God. He does not realize that there is zero, zilch, naught and nothing more important than doing God's will in all things. Pilate does not see the greater reality of God, even when he is standing face to face with God's only Son. He has no conception of the profound privilege or reality of Jesus' presence. Perhaps you and I are not that different from Pilate. When we are working through our daily "to do" lists, are we focusing on our own intelligence and the cornucopia of resources at our disposal, or are we diligently seeking God's guidance and praying for God's will to be done. Surrendering to Christ's sovereign power and presence in our own lives is an hour-by-hour decision, a minute-by-minute choice. It takes a lot of work to even remember our own humble role and position in the vast scheme of God's creation, and the history of salvation. Here's some good news, in our own spiritual growth, putting God at the center of everything is like learning a new skill, something we can all do. On this spiraling staircase, each riser has to be taken one at a time, or we will fall. Nonetheless, we can move from obvious incompetence focused on self and marked by a lack of Christ-like discipline and humility. With patient endurance, and God's help we can take the necessary steps to achieve a modest level of competence, at least most of the time, as evidenced by lives filled with the fruit of the Spirit. We can become people who are imbued with love, joy and peace. Those who embody patience, kindness, and generosity. And those who do God's will in Christ's name faithfully, with gentleness, and self-control.

At the end of this reading, Jesus says, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." We celebrate Christ as our King today, before we begin our new liturgical year and the season of Advent. Jesus is our Savior and King because he embodies and reveals God, who is Truth. Because He testifies and proclaims the truth. As God incarnate, His very being is the truth, and as God's only Son He even belongs to the truth. Belonging to God in Christ is an eternal pursuit transcending all the small affairs of life, many of which have no lasting value. Here's a good way to discern the difference between the things that will perish because they do not glorify God, and those things with everlasting significance in God's eternal kingdom. In ten years' time will what we do today or in some particular task make any difference in helping another person come closer to God, see the face of Christ, build up the Body of Christ, or reveal more of the Truth to the world? If the answer is "no" or even a conditional "yes", we need to think more closely about the stewardship of our God-given time. If we belong to the Truth, we listen to Christ's voice, and mirror what we have heard and learned in our words and deeds. The children's poems reveal God's simplicity in loving kindness, guiding us to learn and grow with one another in the divine embrace that is truly belonging. Another poet, David Whyte, writes, "Innocence is what we allow to be gifted back to us once we've given ourselves away. There is one world only, the one to which we gave ourselves utterly, and to which one day we are blessed to return." The poem is called *Ten Years Later*. As we reflect on what it means to belong, and especially to Whom we belong, may we all also learn to grow together in simplicity and innocence as God's beloved children, giving ourselves utterly to God's service.

Amen.