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Last Sunday of the Year
November 25, 2018

Taking a Wider View

At the risk of sounding older than I am, I'll tell you that a favorite Sunday evening ritual of ours is to watch *60 Minutes*. Usually it's just the parents, but occasionally even our kids will look up from "their" screens if pulled into a great *60 Minutes* story. Last Sunday, one of the featured stories was about astronaut Scott Kelly. Just before his launch into space in 2015, President Obama, in his State of the Union address, said, "Scott Kelly will begin a yearlong stay in space. So good luck, captain. Make sure to Instagram it."

Kelly took president Obama's Instagram challenge to heart. On his fourth mission into space, from 250 miles above the earth, he pointed his camera at the planet. Kelly has collected those space photographs in his new book, *Infinite Wonder*. They are incredible pictures and as Kelly said on *60 Minutes*, "You see continents and countries without any political borders. It gives you the impression that we're all in this thing called humanity together."

It's hard for me to imagine what that would be like, to see the earth without borders, without country markers, without a clear understanding of who's in charge of this land or that land. Because so much of our world is defined by where people were born or have citizenship, about their status or where they belong, about who makes decisions and holds power.

In today's gospel reading Pilate tries to discern where Jesus belongs and to whom. "Are you the king of your people?" he asks, because if Jesus is a king then that threatens Pilate's power in this region. And then Pilate says, "Your own people, your nation and your clergy leaders have handed you over to me. You belong to them, but they're not treating you like a king. What have you done?"

Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is not from here." And Pilate just cannot wrap his brain around this idea, because it is so foreign to him and everyone around him. Kingdoms (countries), then and now, are defined by who's in power, how land is divided, who holds the same traditions, values, and even religion.

Yet today, with this reading, we are reminded that Jesus' kingdom is not bound by time and place. His kingdom is not about determining who tells the truth, because Jesus is the truth. That's what Pilate misses, what most of the world misses. Jesus' kingdom is never a place, but a perspective; never an established rule, but a stated reality of how to live life; never a fought for hierarchy, but a way of interpreting the world and embodying Jesus' love without borders or limits.ⁱ

Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran theologian, reflects on Jesus as king. She asks, "Where will we see this strange king? Among us still—and in places we never expected. Throughout the scriptures we see a different vision of king and kingdom than the one made known in fairytales, modern monarchies (and even democracies.) Jesus' reign as king is revealed in humility, self-emptying and service to others."ⁱⁱ Jesus' reign is made known through love; love for the Samaritan woman outcast from her community, love for the disciples as he bends down to wash their feet, love poured out for all in the mystery of the cross.

Jesus is a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low. Even today, we see Jesus in the refugees who have left their native lands due to war and oppression. We see Jesus with those struggling to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of massive fires and mass shootings. We see Jesus in shelters where women have sought refuge from abusers. To see Jesus, we will look in all places that kings seldom go.

This king who moves among the people is unlike any other. His power is always on the side of justice for the poor, the downtrodden, the outcast. His power is never self-serving but always exercised on behalf of others. He does not sit on a throne but comes into this world to be fully human and embrace all of humanity with love.

And this is good news for us. It means that when this human life seems too much to bear—when those we love are lost or dying, Jesus, too, knows the pain of being helpless or in sorrow. It means that when our lives are spinning out of control from addiction, financial strain or family strife, our humble king comes to us in “this body,” to draw us close and build us up until hope is restored.

On this last Sunday of the church year, we look back and we look forward, and maybe like astronaut Kelly, we pull back and take a wider view of this world. When we do, we'll see a world without borders or divisions of any kind. We'll see all of humanity held in God's loving embrace.

Bishop Michael Curry was surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of royalty when he preached a stirring sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Yet he challenged those in St. George Chapel, and all who were listening in, to imagine a different kind of world, a world shaped by the self-emptying love of Jesus.

“Imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way. Imagine this tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.”

This is the way of Jesus—a different kind of King—one who loves unselfishly and sacrificially for the redemption of the whole world. This is the one God sent to *embody* love and *reign* with love in our lives. This is the one of whom we sing, “Blessing abounds where'r he reins: the prisoners leap to lose their chains, the weary find eternal rest, and all who suffer want are blest.”

ⁱ The True Kingdom, Karoline Lewis. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5252>

ⁱⁱ A Different Kind of King, Barbara Lundblad. <http://day1.org/4422-on-scripturethe-bible-barbara-lundblad-a-different-kind-of-king-john-18-33-37>