“The Question of Belonging” John 18; 33-37
November 25, 2019

Please pray with me. Holy God, your reign weds justice and love, grace and truth, wisdom and compassion. Help us to listen for your voice that claims us within your reign. From such grace of belonging, launch us to bear witness to your realm with the whole of our lives. Amen.

I don’t know about you, but I totally do not understand the reasoning behind the lectionary. It doesn’t go in any discernible order in my mind – it jumps around and doesn’t follow from Advent to this Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday. So, hearing about Jesus’ trial before Pilate doesn’t really make any sense to me on the Sunday before Advent. OK, so we hear about the Christmas story at Christmas and the Easter story at Easter, but otherwise we jump from story to story with maybe a few connected lessons and this happens each of the three years of the lectionary. But, this is the story we have so we will work with it today.

The Reign of Christ is really all about belonging, first of all to God, and then to our families, our friends and our neighbors and so that is what we will be talking about today. How do we belong in the truest sense of the word? This is a pretty difficult question that really plagues us from the time we are children. If you think about it, most children, at some point in their childhoods, get frustrated enough with their families that they decide to run away. Now, this is kind of cute with a little child who perhaps gets upset because they can’t have all the candy they want or can’t watch all the television they want and so they pack a backpack with their most precious belongings and maybe some crackers or a peanut butter sandwich and head out to find some place better. Generally, either the parents explain to
them what they are up against and talk them out of it, or they go off to some corner of their property or perhaps move into a play house or tree house and then decide it isn’t so much fun and go home.

More tragic are the pre-teens and teen-agers who decide to leave a horrible home life – or – who get hooked on drugs or who perhaps are just rebellious and run away, often with tragic results. There seem to be no safety nets for these youngsters and often no good place to run. The lucky ones are those whose friend’s parents allow them to “couch surf” and make sure they have food. Some pretty sad situations out there and definitely not enough resources to be helpful in all cases.

Back to our main story, Pilate and his situation with Jesus. Let’s look closely at what is happening. This text is called “the trial before Pilate,” but it might better be called, “Pilate on trial.” Pilate knows Jesus should not be on trial and he asks the Jewish leaders, “What accusation do you bring against this man.” “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” Pilate likely considers himself the most powerful, most in control person in Jerusalem. He is “the local representative of the greatest world power of that time.” But - Pilate is absolutely trapped in fear. The Jewish leaders want Jesus crucified and if he doesn’t do as they wish he could have big trouble on his hands. Can he stay in control? Does he have troops enough to quell the trouble the Jewish leaders might stir up? What will his superiors back in Rome think if he can’t control the situation in Jerusalem? Does Pilate really think Jesus is an insurrectionist, or is he scared to death and looking for some
technicality with which to charge him and solve his (Pilate’s) problem. He has to hide his true feelings and beliefs in order to save his own skin.

Jesus seeks to encounter the real Pilate, the one who in truth is utterly trapped in his desperate effort to stay in control. Jesus invites Pilate to be transparent, to share his real feelings, but Pilate is too scared of the results for him. This is the same way Jesus is with the Samaritan woman at the well. Here in the very last encounter Jesus has with a human being before his death, an encounter that leads to his death, Jesus makes an offer to Pilate. “Everyone who belongs to truth listens to my voice,” says Jesus to Pilate. Even to Pilate Jesus offers to be the good shepherd, the shepherding king, who, when his sheep listen to his voice, are led into abundant life.

This situation is not so different from the situations many folks today find themselves in. The manager who is trying to lead a Christian life, but knows he/she must follow the company rules if they want to move up the ladder, earn better pay, be able to pay the mortgage and support the family. Do they turn a blind eye to the personnel manager who finds a way to avoid hiring a person of color, a person who is gay, an immigrant even though they are in the country legally and following all the steps to become a citizen? How about the slightly tainted materials that are being recycled, but shouldn’t be? And the list goes on. No doubt many of you can think of other situations in the same vein.

Churches aren’t immune to this syndrome either. It comes down to the question of are we welcoming to all? Do we try to develop programs to help those who need help? Do we try to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. But, no
matter what Pilate did. No matter what we do, Jesus will go on being the good shepherd, leading those who will allow him to his kingdom, to a life everlasting.

I would like to close with what I think is a beautiful story – I knew it would tie into this sermon when I heard it. I recently officiated a funeral for a gentleman who was so loved by his family and was described as someone who would do anything for anyone. He had been married for almost 63 years. About three months later his widow died suddenly and I was asked to officiate her service. The adult children were understandably upset, the son visibly so upset. You see, neither death was expected. Between the service at the funeral home and the burial he came up to me and said he had to share something with me. He had come to town the night before and was having dinner alone at a restaurant when he overheard the little girl at the next table say to her mother, “Mommy, what does gathering mean?” Her mother asked her what she thought it meant and after thinking for a little bit she said, “well I guess I think of how Jesus gathered sheep, that is gathering, right?” and the Mom said yes and both parties soon left. The United Church of Christ commendation liturgy that I recite with my hand on the urn or casket reads “Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, and a daughter/son of your own redeeming. Receive her/him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the company of the saints in light. Amen.” He said, “I have been searching for something to hold onto for the past week.” Thank you for giving me that image of Jesus as the shepherd to hold onto. You lightened my grief.” I would also add that
this woman, whom I met only once, was absolutely a woman of faith. She knew that her husband was with their daughter who had died a couple of years prior and she knew that they would all be together one day. Her children and grandchildren grew up with this faith and spoke openly of it during the service, but still, it was a terrible loss to not have her with them anymore and the image of Jesus as the Shepherd was truly a comforting image for this bereaved son.

Let us all go forward into the Advent season doing our best to spread Jesus’ love, compassion and caring for all. We have no idea of the load we may lift from someone, giving them hope to move forward. Amen.