

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, November 21, 2021
Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time

“Rooted in Wealth”

Third of a three-part sermon series entitled “Rooted in Love”

Christian Scripture: John 18:33-37



If you thought this morning’s reading from the lectionary calendar was a *wack-a-doodle* one to have for Thanksgiving Sunday, you were not alone. Lynn and I thought the same thing. What in the world are we going to do with a dialogue between Pontius Pilate and Jesus?! How on God’s green Earth does this discourse about Jesus’ kingdom have anything to do with Thanksgiving, our stewardship campaign, or this Sunday’s focus on ‘wealth’?

Before I answer, let me share with you to whom we should give thanks for inspiring this morning’s message from the lectionary reading. First, we thank my

brother and mentor minister, Lee Moore, who rightfully encourages me not to neglect the lectionary calendar. Using the lectionary stretches us by forcing us to grapple with texts in fresh new ways. Thank you, Lee! Next, I'd like to thank Marion Daley who once lovingly and constructively mentioned in a Pub Theology service that she would like to hear more about Jesus in our services. Ha! Here ya go, Marion! This one is all about Jesus.

Truth be told, we really do not have to do much interpretive gymnastics to glean a powerful message related to Pledge Sunday from this scripture. In the conversation Jesus had with Pilate, we hear Pilate trying to figure-out if Jesus thought he is a 'king' and by association if Jesus ruled over some 'kingdom'. Pontius Pilate was the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judaea, serving under Emperor Tiberius from 26 to 36 AD. Jesus knew that he was sparring with a representative of the Roman empire and that any misstep, or misquote, could render him dead. The Pharisees were always trying to lure Jesus into committing *blasphemy* and the Romans were keen to shoe-horn a statement of *treason* – both carried a sentence of capital punishment.

At first, Jesus evaded the question of whether he is a king but after further questioning Jesus responded with "my kingdom" to which Pilate blurted "Ah ha! Got ya! Therefore, you claim you are a king!" But Jesus slithered-out of that one by saying he may have a kingdom, but the kingdom is "not of this world...my

kingdom is from another place". After this qualification, I think Pilate lost interest because no un-earthly kingdom was a threat to Pilate's career or to the Roman empire.

For our Stewardship and Pledge Sunday, I'd like to focus on the concept of 'kingdom'. Kingdoms have two qualities. One, they are built and maintained with military violence and, two, their sole purpose is to amass power in the form of wealth. Wealth generates more military weaponry and more military violence amasses more wealth. This is how the Roman empire was built and this is how the United States has become the largest superpower in the world. So, there is a direct association between kingdoms and wealth.

Jesus pointed-out that contrary to most kingdoms, his kingdom is, first, pacifist in nature. Hence, he stated "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight and release me". Second, we know from other lessons Jesus taught that his kingdom is about sharing resources for the common good. Jesus' kingdom is not about amassing wealth and collecting it in storehouses. In other words, Jesus' kingdom divests its resources.

If we look at the macro-national perspective, last year (2020) the United States spent 778 billion dollars on its military. That is more than the combined military spending of the next eleven highest spending nations. That is just crazy big spending on guns and violence. That's more than China, India, Russia, United

Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, Italy, and Australia *combined!* If Jesus' kingdom is pacifist as he said, then the United States cannot be a Christian nation by any stretch of the imagination!¹ If we look at the Build Back Better Plan, the Congressional Budget Office estimated it would add 367 billion over the next ten years to the deficit.² That would be 37 billion dollars a year or more than twenty times less what we spend on the military per year! So, if we took one twentieth of the budget each year from our military, we would balance our budget and invest in families by providing childcare, improving education, help stop climate change and environmental destruction, replace our led pipes, and repair our bridges. Now of course I am not advocated for specific partisan legislation, I am simply comparing and contrasting investing in destruction with investing in construction. When Jesus stated, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me", he presents our country with a choice: spend money on war or spend money on improving people's lives.

When Jesus says, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me", he also challenges our church to choose kingdoms. Which one will be chosen - the world's or Jesus'? I believe Centre Church divests wisely. I am thankful to our Treasurer,

¹ Peter G. Peterson Foundation, "U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries", July 9, 2021. Found at: https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison, accessed November 20, 2021.

² Congressional Budget Office, "Summary of Cost Estimate for H.R. 5376, the Build Back Better Act", found at: <https://www.cbo.gov/>, accessed November 20, 2021.

Finance Committee, and Endowment Committee for the faithful stewardship of money donated to the church. They have the impossible task of meeting so many needs with limited resources. Yet, our church faithfully gives to wider church ministries like Neighbors in Need, local organizations such as Groundworks and the Help Fund, and to our local church's boards and committees so that they may be able to improve the lives of so many. Our church has almost one million dollars in its endowment. What do we do with it? Accumulate it in our storehouse? Or divest it sustainably? Or divest of it substantively to pay to replace roofs, install elevators, or pay for a Christian Education director? These are all difficult questions that only the membership of the church will have to decide after hearing recommendations from the Long-Range Planning Team and the church Council.

And what if we look at our own giving – our own wealth, no matter how little or great. If everyone on the side of truth listens to Jesus, what does that mean for the numbers you write on your pledge card? Are you on the side of truth, listening to Jesus? Am I? As people of faith, we strive to contribute 10%, a tithe, of that which God gives to us. When I give 10% of my take-home pay to the church, I give knowing that I am not giving to war and violence to which most of my tax dollars contribute. Instead, Center Church gives its divestment to the common good. Centre Church listens to Jesus. With your giving to Centre Church

you will be contributing to Jesus' kingdom. And that's an investment I want to make! On this Thanksgiving Sunday, let us give thanks for all our blessings by investing in blessing others through our church. We are, after all, 'Rooted in Wealth'. As a nation, a church, and individuals, we must discern prayerfully how wealth is to be used to foster Jesus' kingdom.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"