

The earliest Christian confession was not, “Jesus is the Son of God” or “Christ forgives sin.” No, the earliest Christian confession that led many to a death sentence were three simple words: Jesus is Lord. At the time, that confession was a political statement. In a world where Caesar claimed to be Lord, to say Jesus is Lord was treasonous. Today is Christ the King Sunday, where we celebrate the lordship of Christ over all earthly powers. Though rooted in the earliest Christian confession, it is one of the newest holidays on our church calendar, established by Pope Pius XI in 1925. It was created in response to a resurgent nationalism in Europe that had already caused one world war with 40 million casualties. Pope Pius was concerned the Christian nations of Europe had not learned the lesson that nationalism is idolatry and will only lead to more violence. How right he was. A few years later another World War would claim 80 million casualties. Though kings are largely a relic of the past, nationalism is not. In fact, it’s on the rise again. It’s high time Christians reclaim this holiday, that across all our opinions on politics, our allegiance is not to a party, a tribe, or a country, but to Christ our king. Sometimes I wonder if we understand Jesus any better than Pilate did.

When we hear the word “king” we think of power, don’t we? Kings are those with power to get things done in the world. Humans seek, admire, fear, and even worship power. Power is the language Pilate understood, so when he asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” he is asking if Jesus wields power in the same manner that he did. But what Pilate didn’t see, and what we often fail to see is that Jesus wields a different kind of power. There’s the power of coercion, and the power of subversion. Christ’s kingdom only knows one of these and nothing of the other.

The power of coercion is how we get things done in the world. If the police come to arrest you, and you say, “No thanks, I’m not interested.” What happens? They take you by force—that’s the power of coercion. When your boss tells you to work extra hours over Thanksgiving and you refuse, what happens? Well, at some point you’ll need to find another job. Coercive power is how the world functions, and the problem is that it works... at least to a certain extent. Robert Farrar Capon calls this right-hand power—using force to get the result you want. He writes, “From removing dust with a cloth to removing your enemy with a .45, it achieves its ends in sensible, effective, easily understood ways.” That’s right-hand power. It’s the power of law and business, and it’s the power Pilate understands. As far as he is concerned, it’s the only power there is.

But if coercive power is the only power you understand, then you are missing out on what matters most in life. Think about being a parent. When your baby is born, we go about making sure the home is baby proof. We install child locks on the cabinets and set up boundaries around the baby to ensure their safety. All of this is well and good, and all of it is coercive power. As the child grows, the boundaries do too—child locks become verbal reprimands which become time outs, which become you’re grounded. But if your relationship with your child remains one of coercive power, when the child is 10, 15 and 20 years old, what kind of relationship will you have? None. You won’t have a relationship unless you learn another kind of power—the subversive power of weak, vulnerable love.

Coercive power gets a lot of things done but not everything. It can build bridges and enforce laws, but it can never get your teenage child to care about doing what's right, not out of fear of reprisal but for the sake of love. Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of love, and in it, coercion never enters the picture. Jesus' kingdom doesn't operate with the power of the right hand. No, Jesus' kingdom is subversive. It's not power from above but power from below that undermines the power of coercion all together.

Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" And Jesus replies, "Do you ask this on your own or did others tell you about me?" With the first words out of his mouth, Jesus is subverting Pilate. I thought Pilate was the one doing the interrogation here. He's the one with the real power, right? Pilate senses this subversion and says, "Hey man, am I a Jew? It's your people who handed you over to me. What did you do?" And then Jesus says one of the most famously misunderstood things he ever said, "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here." How many of you grew up hearing this verse, "My kingdom is not of this world?" Me too! But that's not what the Greek says. It says my kingdom is not from this world. It has a different origin than yours, Pilate. And that little preposition makes a big difference.

If we think Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, then we're left thinking Jesus is concerned with souls and the afterlife, and he leaves the running of the world to Pilate, Herod, and the Caesars of the day. Pilate has his realm, and Jesus has his. But if Jesus said, "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world" then his kingdom can still be utterly concerned with the here and now while not being legitimized by coercive, worldly power, unlike Pilate. How does Pilate's kingdom originate? At the threat of violent, coercive power. If you don't like it, there's a cross waiting for you with your name on it. If Jesus' kingdom originated with coercive power, then his followers would take up arms on his behalf, but they don't. Jesus' disciples cannot use violence because their power is another kind all together. Few of us courageous enough to follow Jesus' call to non-violence. In a world that worships violence, it's no wonder we don't understand Jesus. This is where stories like the Marvel movies lie to us, because in them, hope always resides in the power of coercion, that the good guys will defeat the bad by force, but this is both demonstrably false and short sighted. Why? To get rid of the bad guys would destroy us all, because good and evil reside in each of us.

Subversive power looks ineffective compared to coercion but that's short-sighted. Because love subverts everything. When you are on your death bed, what will comfort you—that people feared you, that you defeated the competition? Or will you be comforted by the only thing that matters in the end—that you gave and received love? Jesus' kingdom appears weak and ineffectual next to the kingdoms of this world, and yet 2000 years later Jesus' kingdom endures while Pilate's has long since been forgotten. Pilate is a mere footnote in the story of Jesus, and his legacy is like so many before and after him—a cog in the machine of coercive power, hiding behind the claim, "I was just doing my job." I'm sure you were. Don't you want a better job, though? Jesus' subversive power doesn't look like

much when compared to Rome's legions, but 2000 years later, Rome's empire has long since fallen, and there are more Jesus followers today than ever before.

Love may not look like much compared to the sword or the gun, but it holds a power over you that no government ever can. Because in the end, love is the only truth worth living for. Jesus says everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. And Pilate responds, "What is truth?" The irony is that even as he asks the question, truth is standing right in front of him, and he misses it. Truth is not a concept or proposition. Truth is embodied in how we treat the person in front of us. Pilate can't see it. All he sees is right-handed power. And if coercive power is the truth, then everything is fake news. Everything is propaganda. There is no relationship between truth and reality. For truth to be connected to reality, there must be something that connects us to one another, a relationship of love, and that connection is what Christ's kingdom is all about. Blaise Pascal put it this way, "Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that unless we love the truth, we cannot know it." To know the truth is to love the truth. If we love the truth, we will love the person standing in front of us, whoever that may be. In loving the truth, we discover the only truth is love.

This is what we confess when we say, "Jesus is Lord." It's not about getting the right answer on God's afterlife test. It's not about being part of a party, tribe, or country. It's about seeing that the kingdom of coercion can never save us. Only love can and does save us. It's the truth standing right in front of us.