

**Where Are You From?**  
**John 19:1-16a**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
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“Where are you from?” I was sitting in an interview with one of the most prestigious and powerful boutique law firms in all of Dallas. They had only approved six students who had applied to interview for clerkships, six out of a class of about 75. It was intimidating to be included in the group that made the cut and the question caught me off guard. Why would they care if I was from Houston, Harlem or Hamburg? They had my resume. It showed my grades in college and law school and my references from my professor and attorney family friend. But this odd question seemed important to them. Where was I from?

I remember I started describing the part of Houston I grew up in, working class and a growing white collar population. And I could feel their interest waning. I wasn't from a wealthy or powerful part of the city. I hadn't gone to a high-powered or high-prestige high school. I wasn't part of any community that signified wealth or power. Apparently, all of my answers were wrong and I wasn't asked back to their Dallas offices for a further interview.

“Where are you from?” was their way of weeding out the riffraff, which apparently, I was. I never heard that question in an interview again with any other law firm or church. I later learned that they were an old money firm with old money clients who had a certain set of expectations in their lawyers and they never hired anyone who rocked that boat.

Where you are from frequently explains your relationship to power and influence. Children from this neighborhood have a different relationship to privilege and power to those who live just on the other side of the North Shore Channel. I wonder, is that why Pilate asks Jesus such an odd question? In the face of an allegation that Jesus has called himself the Son of God, Pilate inquires into where he is from. That seems odd doesn't it? Until you look at the coin on the cover of today's bulletin. That's the version of the main piece of currency for the common people in Jesus' day in the Roman Empire. It's the Tiberius Denarius or Tribute Penny. The Inscription reads “Ceasar Augustus Tiberius, Son of God Augustus.”

Wait just a minute there. Son of God is one of the titles of the Emperor? Now it's all starting to make sense, isn't it? He has claimed to be the Son of God, this Jesus. So the temple leadership asserts at the top of their lungs that he has claimed a title that belongs to the emperor. Now can you see why Pilate might be afraid? Why he wants to know where the heck this Jesus came from if he's so foolish as to use those words to describe himself? It was bad enough when they said Jesus was called King of the Jews, but Pilate and the soldiers could and did mock that title. After all, who cared who the king of the Jews was if they were a vassal people of the Roman Empire. Any such king would have a kingdom made of air and no power because Rome had all the power.

Rome had the power and had granted it to Pilate. Caesar had the power and had granted it to Pilate. But what might happen if word got back to Caesar that Pilate had a man in his

court claiming to be a Son of God just like Tiberius and had let him go free with just a beating? Pilate is afraid, because Pilate knows that his power is completely dependent upon Caesar giving it to him, and what Caesar gives, Caesar can take away. So Pilate toes the party line. I guess we shouldn't be too surprised by that, should we?

Twenty-eight years ago in Burma, now called Myanmar, the political party of Aung San Suu Kyi won a majority of seats in the Burmese parliament in the first elections following a military coup. But the military refused to turn over power to the duly elected government. It made a hero of the one the people who came to be called the Burmese equivalent of Auntie Aung. She was placed under house arrest and, as a symbol of the democracy movement, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Fast forward 28 years. Times have changed in Myanmar. Since 2015, Aung San has been the First Counselor of Myanmar, the equivalent of the Prime Minister. In 2012 and 2015, the Rohingya Muslim minority in one of the states of Myanmar publicly protested their oppression by the Buddhist majority. They were being denied citizenship and their property rights were being violated. Many say that since early 2017, those oppressive actions have risen to the level of genocide. Tens of thousands have been killed, hundreds of thousands are refugees, and entire villages have been burned — more than once with people still in their homes.

And yet the First Counselor, this champion of human rights, has toed the Burmese military's official line that this is not the result of state action despite overwhelming video and other physical evidence to the contrary. She has denied the Rohingya's request for citizenship. Many assert that the First Minister is so desperate to keep the democratically elected parliament in place despite military excesses, that she has compromised her principles, and even her humanity to maintain whatever power she may have.

The irony? In her writings after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi said this: "It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it."

But we don't have to look around the globe to see this, do we? Where of late have you seen people surrender their principles to maintain power? Have you watched some of the ads running in the current election cycle? Some of it makes "We Have no King but Caesar" sound very familiar.

In a recent editorial in the *Washington Post*, the Rev. Dr. Jim Wallace, evangelical leader from the Baptist tradition, wrote: "American Christians have not really reckoned with the climate [the current administration] has created in our country and the spiritual obligation we have to repair it. As a result, the soul of our nation and the integrity of the Christian faith are at risk."

Conservative leader Rev. Dr. Herschel York of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary recently expressed concern about some Christian leaders so desperate to maintain their connections with power that they have turned a blind eye to policies and practices that make a mockery of Jesus' teachings. As he put it, "[One] narrative we can put on [this is] the Pharisees conniving with Pontius Pilate. The question is, is it collusion, complicity, connivance, or is it capitalization on a unique moment in history to shape the future through judicial appointments? It's a really difficult moment for evangelicals."

Rev. Dr. York would argue, and I would agree that religious leaders cannot wrap the gospel around any party platform, around any earthly power structure, but that the gospel and those who proclaim it must confront all earthly power in truth and grace.

So, where are we from? Are we from the halls of power or are we from the cross of Christ? Do we have no king but the Caesars of our modern world or do we declare God to be sovereign in our lives? It's easy to pay lip service to the latter but hard to accomplish much if one doesn't have some connection to earthly power.

Today in Pilate's quarters and out on the porch we see the direct confrontation between one who knows what is right but will not do it because he fears losing power, and one who makes it clear that Pilate's pontifications about his power do NOT have ultimate power over him. Jesus makes it clear that he has never surrendered his own power in his confrontation with the Roman and the temple authorities: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." What Pilate doesn't know is that Jesus is the personification of that very power from above — God made flesh.

Well, so what, pastor? You haven't given us any solution to this dilemma, nothing particularly helpful, just a reminder that if God is sovereign, this is really hard. For a possible way forward, I want to suggest that we turn for a moment to physics. Let me be clear, I am no physicist. My last class in the subject was in 1984 and there's a reason I spent most of my life in the humanities. But I do remember that physics assigns two different formulae to power. One is force times velocity. How dominating is the force and how quickly does it act? That sounds like the kind of power Pilate is familiar with. How hard will we beat you? How fast will the whip fly? How quickly will he call in the Roman guards if the people get too rowdy or disobedient?

Force times velocity power seems to also be the kind we are reading about from the halls of earthly power, too, doesn't it? Putin celebrates a missile system that is too big and too fast for any of our defensive measures. This person expresses an unpopular opinion with the powers that be and he or she gets a tweet removing them from power — speed and the sharp direct blow. But there is another formula for power in physics too, isn't there? Anyone know what it is? It's work divided by time — work over time.

In her upcoming book, *God, Improv and the Art of Living*, my dear friend and colleague MaryAnn McKibben Dana considers these two formulae for power and opts for the second as the work of discipleship in this power-mad world — work over time. As she puts it: Work over time "power looks like a last supper with friends in which Jesus breaks bread and pours wine and says all the things that need to be said. [Work over time] Power is not fighting back when the mob comes to arrest you. [It's] declaring forgiveness in the final faltering breaths. [It] is new life bursting forth from the grave... a church that gets it wrong so often but oh when we get it right you've got to shield your eyes from the brilliance of it; [it's] that we're still here 2,000 years later, fighting evil with good, feeding the hungry and caring for the stranger. Work over Time, Work over Time."

Will that always be easy? Will our choosing Jesus' Work over Time kind of power over Pilate's Force times Velocity power always leave us in the winner's circle in this life? I

wish I could say yes. But what is the alternative? Surrender to the biggest army, the biggest despot, the biggest paycheck, the biggest gun? Are we supposed to just sit by and surrender our humanity to maintain the earthly power we have by compromising the very gospel that is supposed to shape our lives? Are we supposed to let faith shrink down into something so tame and tepid it means little or nothing in our daily lives?

As this chapter continues (and as we will hear next week), Jesus will shortly head out for Golgotha. But here's what I know he will take with him — Herod's fear that Caesar would turn on him; the temple leadership's surrender of their allegiance to God in favor of "no king but Caesar;" Peter's fear of being fully known; the Woman at the Well's crushed self-esteem; the shame of the Man Born Blind and his parents; Lazarus and Mary and Martha's captivity to death; Nicodemus' fear of being wrong; and every one of our failings, including all of those moments we have surrendered to fear — whether because we think we are powerless or to keep the power we have. That's why this text is the mirror image of the text about Peter two weeks ago. He surrendered to fear because he thought he was powerless. Pilate and the temple leaders surrender to fear to KEEP the power they have.

Jesus' fearlessness is luckily not something we have to emulate, for it is exercised on our behalf as well. But may it nevertheless give us the strength to not be guided by or controlled by our fears. May it help us to see that if we define where we come from by the power and influence of a place or a people, we have gotten our personal geography all wrong. May it help us see that the power that truly matters — that truly empowers — is, in Jesus' words, that Power from above that chooses life over execution, grace over death, joy over domination, and love over dominance and control.

Amen.