

Faith Mennonite Church  
November 25, 2012 - Reign of Christ  
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### **A kingdom of truth**

*Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 93; John 18:33-37*

If you have followed the Mennonite press during the past election season, you will have read some lively debate about whether Mennonites should vote, at least in the presidential contest. One school of thought, articulated by a former member of this congregation, was that on issues important to people committed to peace and to immigration and environmental justice, neither of the two candidates of the leading parties had a robust record. Should a Christian vote for President Obama, who has directed drone warfare that has killed civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan? Should a Christian vote for Governor Romney, who advocated increased military spending beyond what the pentagon requested? Can we vote and be faithful to our conscience?

The other school of thought viewed voting for a presidential candidate not as a vote of approval or endorsement of every policy or position of that person. Rather one votes to support the general direction of one candidate or the other—the direction they believe to be most advantageous for the greatest number of people, with special concern for those on the margins of society and for critical issues.

As you can imagine, there was not consensus among Mennonites on this issue. And of those who voted, we can be sure that not all shared the same elation or desperation when the votes were tallied. Mennonites, like the larger Christian community in North America, are divided when it comes to political and economic policy matters. And this division into red and blue camps in the church is precisely why one Mennonite professor, John D. Roth of Goshen College, has proposed a moratorium on voting for all Mennonites in the past couple election cycles. He hoped it would clarify our first and foremost alliance to Jesus, our proclaimed leader of a kingdom that is not from this world!

But just what is that kingdom and does it totally remove us from political activity in this world? At the monthly regional Central Plains Conference meetings that some of us have been participating in this fall our Executive Conference Minister David Boshart repeatedly reminds us that discernment is the *permanent* task of the church. Clearly one of the areas that we are continuing to discern is the relationship between our political involvement in this world and our allegiance to Christ who proclaimed a kingdom “not of this world.” The conference process has reminded us that unity in the body of Christ is not a matter of human perfection or consensus on any particular issue. Rather it is a gift of God to those who seek to be children of God and to those who come together in settings of discernment.

It’s uncomfortable to speak of Jesus in the language of kingdom and king when we live in a post-monarchic society and era. Truth be told, this is the first year in my five years of pastoring here, that I’ve chosen to preach from the lectionary texts for this day, which emphasize Christ as King. In the past I’ve opted for a Thanksgiving theme, since this Sunday always precedes the first Sunday of Advent in the liturgical calendar. But whenever I feel uncomfortable with something, that’s usually an indication that I should probably delve in a bit deeper. And so here we are!

For over 200 years our country has practiced democratic rule without a royal family. We know the weaknesses of our system and, ironically, it sometimes seems we have a congress full of kings trying to protect their particular fiefdoms. But overall, the political ethos in this country rests on the expectation that our leaders are essentially common folks. They who are like us, represent us and work on our behalf. We can vote them in and out so we don’t offer them our allegiance. Kings and kingdoms are things of the past, outmoded systems of power and rule.

Nevertheless, according to the gospel record, Jesus spoke the language of kingdom, probably because that was the language of the day. Perhaps if he had been born in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century he would have used the language of government or society or community. What’s clear is that Jesus was not proclaiming a government (or kingdom) for the sake of himself or his personal political gain; it’s hard to imagine him participating in one of our multi-million-dollar political campaigns. The kingdom that Jesus

proclaimed was for the sake of the world. His purpose was to help his listeners align themselves with God's presence in the world. He didn't build political programs to establish a kingdom, but rather announced a kingdom that was already present. The kingdom, he told his followers, was present within and among them. The kingdom was about liberation and healing—from sickness and selfishness, from prison, poverty and debt.

It might seem a bit ironic that the gospel text for this day when the church celebrates the “reign of Christ” is one in which Jesus is on trial, accused of being a king. The passage itself contains its own ironies: although Jesus is supposedly the one on trial, we quickly get the sense that Pilate is the one who is squirming, the one whose control is threatened, as he shuttles between Jesus' accusers and Jesus himself. What's more, in this interrogation setting, Jesus doesn't ward off the charges with words but points to the actions of his followers. “If I were a king according to the usual game plan, I'd have an army and my followers would defend and protect me.” But Jesus had nothing to defend. He wasn't interested in geographic domination, or control of natural resources. He was interested in truth. He was born, he told Pilate, to “testify to the truth.” “People who belong to the truth,” he said, “listen to my voice.”

Truth was an important concept for the writer of the Gospel of John. This gospel includes memorable passages such as “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free” (8:32) and “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). Pilate's interrogation of Jesus suggests that he (Pilate) thought of truth in an intellectual way—as a set of facts to be established, perhaps even as ideas that one could mandate. Pilate was set on managing the truth. But Jesus regarded truth in a different way—not thought but action. For Jesus, truth was giving oneself over to a distinct reality. The theologian Dorothy Soelle has written of this truth as a “discerning obedience” to the way of life that Jesus proclaimed. Truth as active, discerning obedience springs from a realm where “freedom, change, and spontaneity coalesce so that we not only accept responsibility for the world around us but seek to be a part of God's transformation of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus told Pilate his kingdom was not “from this world,” I don't think he meant that it didn't exist in the world. Jesus wasn't insinuating a future place in another dimension that people would go to after death if they believed the right thing. No, Jesus' kingdom was now and is now, but entirely different from the usual workings of the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God, Jesus told Pilate, is marked by its non-violence and its insistence on non-coercive truth, truth that seeks to be “part of God's transformation of the world.”

As citizens of God's realm our first allegiance is not to a single country but to God's transformational work in the whole world. Our Christian family spans the entire world and our prayer is for the healing of all the nations rather than protection or blessing for only a certain few. Being non-violent and seeking after truth are closely linked. Both require humility, inviting not coercing, and admitting our imperfection and our imperfect knowledge. We act with a discerning eye and heart, set on reading the Word and the world, never sure that we are entirely right, but always sure that God's rightness, God's justice, will continue to draw us ever deeper into truth.

So, we're past the most recent election but future cycles will come, and we circle back to the original question: should Mennonites vote? If we were able to pose this question to Jesus, I imagine he'd answer in a similar way he answered the question about paying taxes: “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which belongs to God.” If we are interacting with and benefitting from our society, voting on Election Day is probably no more or less significant than voting with our dollars each time we make a purchase, voting with our decisions about when to walk, drive, bike, or take the bus or train; or voting with how we will use our leisure time. All of these require discerning obedience. Let us follow Jesus, our leader, who asks us to be faithful in all ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie M. Townes reflecting on Soelle's *Beyond Mere Obedience* in “Theological Reflection on John 18:33-37, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).



