

Christ the King, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
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If you ever want an exercise in exacting patience, try teaching a five-year-old to play the violin. I taught on and off for fifteen years, and I can tell you it is not for the faint of heart. One of the tricks, though, is trying really hard to get the student to move slowly enough so that they don't make too many mistakes. You see, if they play something properly, no matter how slowly, you can build on their success. But if they move too fast and make mistakes too many times, it's harder to go backward and undo the lesson. In other words, it's much better to learn slowly than to have to go back and unlearn later. Unlearning is really hard.

There are so many things I have been taught in my life that, upon sober adult reflection, do not seem true to me anymore. These weren't necessarily messages I received at home, but more they were lessons taught by TV, films, politicians, the casual opinions of neighbors, or even magazine covers.

I'm finding unlearning to be almost a holy experience in my life. For instance, the movies of my childhood taught me that heroes are always young, male, white, macho, and straight. They also taught me that villains are Arabic, Black, or Latino. TV taught me that nuclear families are the gold standard for how to have a happy life and that Christianity is the only religion of importance in our nation. Somehow, I was taught that men should act like men, and women should act like women. And, probably the most damaging for me personally, that queer people are going to have terrible lives of isolation, disease, and possible eternal damnation.

Everything that I listed here I have had to spend some time unlearning. And I imagine it is something that each generation has to do, and I imagine that it is the project of wisdom and maturity. There are lessons I have been taught that I now reject. And I hope that I am wise enough to know that there are things I teach now that the next generation will have their own take on.

It occurs to me, on this Christ the King Sunday, that Christianity is sometimes a process of examining and then unlearning something that is in our brain, masquerading as truth.

In our Gospel today, Pilate and Jesus are in a verbal sparring match. Pilate sits there representing the status quo of the day — Roman power, Latin language, the occupation of a tiny nation by a powerful one, and the worshiping of the Emperor. Jesus represents something very different. Poor, from the margin, living like a teacher and a prophet in the villages rather than like a prince in a palace in Jerusalem.

And in this encounter between Pilate and Jesus, I think that we, the listener, are supposed to be hearing two sets of values. Pilate personifies the might of the Roman army, its centurions, its legions, and its economic domination of a quarter of the world. And Jesus, arrested and facing death, personifies a rabbinic figure who focuses his attention on the sick and suffering, the

outcast, and the sinner. I don't remember Jesus once talking about an empire he would build. Instead, he talked about the Kingdom of God as if it is a mustard seed, leaven in bread, a widow's coin, or a pearl of great price.

I think in the United States, we cannot help but identify with Pilate and the power of Rome. We understand military and economic might. We know what it is to have a global presence, and we know what it is to be a powerhouse on the world stage. In a lot of ways, Pilate is our national model. Pilate preferences the dominant caste of people in a nation, and I think we see that dominance played out all the time in America—unfair lending practices, stacked juries, wildly divergent educational outcomes between white children and children of color, underrepresented board rooms, c suites, school boards etc., etc. Jim Crow was not very long ago, and I have a feeling the Romans would have thought that was a pretty brilliant system. We are living with the aftermath of those national sins today. Samuel Seabury, the first Episcopal bishop in this country, owned slaves. Virginia Theological Seminary, storied house of learning, was built at least partially with slave labor.

But here we sit, on a Sunday morning, as Christian people trying to follow, not Pilate, but Jesus. How do we unlearn our Pilate ways so that we have the space to sit and learn from Jesus.

It's not easy — most everything outside of these doors tells us that power, violence, money, and victory are the cardinal virtues of this life. But Jesus, our ruler, our sovereign, and this morning, our king, asks us to unlearn all of that and to pay attention to the things that God loves instead — radical compassion, justice, care for the poor, and peace.

Unlearning is hard, but I'm pleased to report that there is a special classroom created for just such a purpose. It's called a sanctuary, and you are sitting in it right now. This is the place where, through song and prayer and practice, we examine the lessons of the world and hold them up against the lessons of Jesus. This is the place where Pilate and Jesus have their midnight debate. And, though of course, we fail at times, we strive to follow the lessons of Jesus and to unlearn the lessons of the world. Those lessons that the world tries to teach us are powerful, but Jesus is always more so. We leave this place renewed and ready to engage with the Pilates of our time and hope to do a little teaching of our own. Amen.