

The 14th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**September 6, 2020****PROPER 18**

The Lessons: Ezekiel 33:7-9
 Psalm 32:1-7
 Romans 13:1-10
 Matthew 18:1-20

The Hymns: # 966 (1-3) *Before You, Lord, We Bow*
 # 725 (1-4) *Children of the Heavenly Father*
 # 707 (1,2,4) *Oh, That the Lord Would Guide My Ways*

The Collect: O God, from whom all good proceeds, grant to us, Your humble servants, Your holy inspiration, that we may set our minds on the things that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:

"God's Two Kingdoms"
 Matthew 18:15-20

I. Kingdoms of Power

Kingdoms of this world are built and kept and defended by power. That is not a criticism; it is simply a fact. In order to build a kingdom, you need to have a lot of money; you need to have a lot of money because money buys power. And power is what you really need, because kingdoms are built by coercion, force, and leverage; by strength, battle and bloodshed. You have to have an awful lot of muscle if you're going to make a kingdom. As Al Capone is rumored to have said, "You can get a lot farther with a gun and a smile than with just a smile."

Furthermore, you can't be afraid to get your hands dirty, to exploit your enemy's weaknesses. If you should come upon a misstep that your opponent has committed, use it against him. Shame him into silence or make him the object of scorn in the court of public opinion.

And whatever you do, invoke the name of God. People don't generally follow kings who say, "God's NOT on my side;" therefore, tack His name onto whatever you do. If you have to break the rules, then make it clear that you are breaking the rules of man in order to follow the will of God.

Of course, there's no room for humility in kingdom-building — you have to have an incredible self-assurance. And be aware that, in order to build a kingdom, you will often have to tear down another one to make room. If people don't agree and don't want to do things your way, crush them.

This is how you build a kingdom: By power, by force, by assertion, by an act of will. Look at the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus: It wasn't built by kindness and sensitivity. It was built by violence, control, and a message of cooperation that said, "Do things our way or be destroyed."

Throughout the centuries, some have proposed that Christians have no part in such a kingdom where power and violence are necessary to keep the borders secure. However, our epistle for this day (Romans 13:1-10) makes clear that such power is necessary in this world. It is God who appoints rulers, and He gives them the responsibility to bear the sword in defense of what is good. A ruler is "God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Ro. 13:4). Rulers, be they kings or elected officials, are obligated by the Lord to rule justly, to punish the evildoer, and to wage war to protect their citizens from unjust attack.

Christians are therefore to support their rulers, provided their rulers are using such power righteously. It is among the duties of the Christian as a citizen to pray for his leaders and nation, pray for the enemy as well, serve his neighbor, and even lay down his life in service to his country.

We live in a world where kingdoms are built and kept and defended by power. You are therefore a citizen of a nation which relies on power to endure. This is not a bad thing: As long as there is evil in the world, evil must be curbed by law and force. This is how the Lord has established things to be. You are a citizen of a kingdom that relies on power; but for Christians, this is only half of the story.

2. Kingdom of Grace

You are also a citizen of another kingdom, because the Lord Jesus Christ has brought you into His kingdom, made you His citizen. You are part of His kingdom, but His kingdom is built on a different foundation.

It is not built upon money and power. In fact, when Jesus first sends out His disciple to proclaim the kingdom, He does not instruct them to amass a war chest and armory first; instead, He instructs them to take no money, no extra supplies, not even a staff.

It's a kingdom of grace. In other words, Jesus does not add you to His kingdom by saying, "As long as you prove your worth and your loyalty by your efforts, I will make you Mine." He does not declare, "When you no longer aid and abet the enemy by sinning, then you have the strength to be my citizen." He most certainly does not say, "As soon as you go out and kill my enemies with the sword, then you belong in My paradise." He says none of these things, because this is not a kingdom of force. Instead, He says things like, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made in perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

The Lord makes you His by His **own** work — by His work of taking away your sins. He declares that you are forgiven because of what **He** has done; and rather than a show of strength, He calls upon us humbly to confess our sins and our need for repentance. He gathers a kingdom of the weak, the humble, the lowly, the penitent. These are not usually the qualities that one desires in the citizens of a nation.

Furthermore, listen to how He commands His citizens to act: If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

Remember, building a kingdom of power involves exploiting weakness and using it as a weapon. But when a Christian sins against you, how are you to react? If it is a private sin between him and you, go and show him his sin privately; do it again if you have to. If he doesn't repent, take a witness or two along to urge him to confess his sin; do this several times if need be. If the matter continues, it may be necessary to tell it to the church, so that believers might pray for him and call him to repent. What is the purpose of all of this — to

shame and exploit his sin? Not at all — the goal is to bring him to repentance, so that he might be forgiven. In an army of a kingdom of power, such a rebellious soldier would be thrown in the guardhouse or dishonorably discharged. But this is not a kingdom of power, but of grace; and Christians are thus to make all attempts to bring grace to the sinner. It is only as a last resort that an impenitent sinner is asked to leave the Church.

But this is how the kingdom of grace operates: The Lord Jesus gathers the lowly, weak types who confess their sin and inability to serve Him. He forgives them, and then calls for them to forgive and serve each other. It's a Church built on forgiveness, not force; it's a kingdom of grace, not power. And it will never work. At least, that's what the world claims. In fact, it's a mystery to the world that the Church has survived this long, and no surprise that the world expects the demise of the Church to come soon. This is for two reasons: The world is blinded by sin and thus cannot comprehend forgiveness, and the world is so accustomed to kingdoms of power that a kingdom of grace sounds like nonsense.

It doesn't make sense, the world will tell you. Forgiveness is nice and all, but it doesn't get the job done. The Church can't survive by preaching the grace of Jesus. It had better develop financial savvy instead, and learn to use the powers of sociology and diversity to attract more people. A message of a cross and forgiveness isn't going to go very far; the Church will not be relevant if it keeps speaking of a man who was last seen on earth 2000 years ago. If the Church is going to have authority in this world, it had better move away from that and take up some social causes instead. Trust and forgiveness are no match for the sword or public opinion. The Church had better build an alliance with other religions and faiths in order to present a united front. Otherwise, it won't survive. It's a wonder it has this long.

We Christians are no less guilty of confusing this kingdom of grace with a kingdom of power. On a very personal level, consider the Lord's words about forgiveness in our Gospel lesson today, and how tempting it is to ignore them in favor of power:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. This is the right thing to do, to gain the brother back by the forgiveness of sins. However, the right thing is not the easy thing. It is far easier-and more natural-to gossip, to tell others how you've been wronged. Whatever else it may be, this gossip is a play for power-to exploit somebody's weakness by spreading the news to others; this makes you superior to your brother, because he is the sinner and you are the victim. It gives you power. But it's not the way of the Lord.

Not all turn to gossip. Some go to the sinner and tell him his fault — not for the purpose of forgiveness, but for the purpose of revenge. Many a man has gotten off the phone after chewing out a brother, sighed a big sigh and said, "There, I feel better." This is not an attempt at reconciliation; it is a play for power, to make someone else feel worse so that you feel better.

Of course, the brother who has sinned is also guilty of going for power instead of grace. When one Christian or a whole Church calls upon him to repent so that he might be forgiven, he may obstinately refuse. Instead of confession, he may seek to hurt those who confront him. He might go on the offensive and bring up past sins of others, or he might twist facts and slander those who seek his repentance. This is not the way of grace. This is trying to use power to get one's way, to create one's own little kingdom of authority. If the sinner so persists, the Church is eventually to dismiss him from among the faithful. This is not an act of vengeance: It is a recognition that the sinner has chosen his sin and his private kingdom of power over

forgiveness and the kingdom of grace. He has made himself an ex-member of the communion of saints; that is why this recognition is called ex-communication.

Because the Church, this kingdom of grace, is made up of weak and lowly sinners, such sins are far too commonplace. Each sin is a quest for personal power instead of service to God. We must agree with the world: It's a wonder that the Church has survived this long. In fact, it's nothing short of a miracle.

Remember, this is a world in which kingdoms are built, kept and defended by power. They remain because battles are fought and blood is shed. They continue because rulers are present and accounted for, wielding the sword and using their authority to make sure the kingdom remains. Ah, but here's the thing — the wonderful miracle that tells us why the Church has survived. Blood has already been shed to establish this kingdom. The battle has already been fought. And the outcome was so decisive that this kingdom of grace will remain forever.

It didn't look like much of a battle — it looked like one side had all the power. A group of soldiers the angry mob and a severely beaten man on a hilltop outside Jerusalem. They crucified Him and watched Him die. Some battle. But this was no ordinary man: This was the Son of God become flesh, and His battle was not against the soldiers and the hecklers. He was fighting against sin, death and the devil. By His death, He destroyed the power of sin to condemn, because He has died for all of the sins of the world. By His resurrection, He has destroyed the power of death, ripping open the tomb; death can no longer hold His people in the grave. By defeating sin and death, He robbed the devil of his weapons of terror; and thus the devil was defeated forever.

This kingdom of grace was established by battle and bloodshed. The Savior shed His blood, and in doing so He has defeated His enemies and established His kingdom forever.

This kingdom stands forever, but there will be skirmishes as the devil seeks to destroy Christians before they reach heaven. Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ visits His people, gathers them in and continues to strengthen His kingdom. How? He promises, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Christians are gathered in the name of Jesus when they gather according to His Word. According to His Word, they hear the words of Holy Absolution: "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." They are gathered and rejoice in Holy Baptism, where water is accompanied by the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." They are gathered to His holy Supper, where the Lord named Jesus gives them His body and blood "for the forgiveness of sins." Do you see? Your King of grace is not far away: He is present with you, in His Word and in His Sacraments. And by these means of grace, He forgives you your sin. He shares His victory with you and makes you part of His kingdom. He gives you eternal life.

He is here where only a few, two or three, are gathered. This doesn't look like much of a power cell to the world; but the number of believers isn't what matters. What matters is that the Lord is present, forgiving sins and giving salvation.

He is with His people at the time of death, whether a hospital bed or crumbling towers. To the world, death signals the end of power and the loss of strength. But the Lord declares that He has destroyed the sting of death, and that He uses this ultimate physical weakness to raise His people unto life everlasting.

He is with His Church, and He is her life. When opposed by kingdoms of power, the Church will suffer indignity and even bloodshed. But she will endure: Christ has died to make her His, and He will deliver her to eternal life.

Today you find yourself in two kingdoms — a kingdom of power and a kingdom of grace. As citizens of this nation, we pray for our rulers and serve our nation, that peace may be established for the good of all. As citizens of Christ's kingdom of grace, we give thanks for His enduring victory, His forgiveness, and the freedom He gives us to serve and forgive one another. When we fail, we confess those sins and trust in His grace once again.

Long ago, the Lord declared, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit" (Zech. 4:6). You are not His people by your strength or power, but by the work of His Holy Spirit. By His doing, you are gathered here. By the faith He gives, you believe and rejoice in Christ's death on the cross, as well as His presence with you now. By this work of the Spirit who brings you into the kingdom of grace, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.