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A VERY FOREIGN COUNTRY

John 18:28-40

I read something recently that I found kind of interesting and humorous. It was about things we do in America that most people in other countries don’t understand. Actually some of them I don’t understand either. One person asked why in American schools students get graded with A, B, C, D, F, but no E. That’s actually a good question.

One I found interesting is many people around the world don’t get our love of peanut butter. Americans consume 700 million pounds of it per year. The average European eats 1 tablespoon a year. Brian Sternthal, professor of marketing at Northwestern University’s School of Management, says, “in many parts of the world peanut butter is regarded as an unpalatable American curiosity.” Too bad for them. More Reese’s for us.

One of the things the rest of the world considers weird is that we measure things in inches, yards and miles while the rest of the world uses the metric system. But our system works so well. Heights for guys who are tall start at 6 feet. You say, “He’s a 6 footer,” “He’s a 1.83 meterer.” All I have to say about that is does anybody want to hear a referee announce that a team just made the line to gain and now it’s first and 9.14 meters to go? I don’t think so. It’s a game of inches, not a game of centimeters. On that subject, it also bothers some other cultures that we call that game football. The object in question isn’t actually shaped like a ball, and they use their hands in the game way more than a foot. But what else are we going to call it? Handball? That name is already taken, plus it doesn’t fit the game. As Andy Griffith said a long time ago, what it is, is football.

They don’t understand why we choose between 2 people for President, but among 50 for Miss America. Another one I also find curious is why we call it a restroom. No one rests in that room, so why? It doesn’t take much to see that countries can be very different. Today we are going to think about a country that no one in our world really understands. It is a different kingdom, and we will see it mentioned in John 18:28-40.

JESUS IS AN OUT OF THIS WORLD KING

When Jesus was arrested he was first taken before Annas, the former chief priest and the father in law of Caiaphas, the current chief priest, then to Caiaphas himself in an effort to come up with some charge that the Roman governor would take seriously. They came up mostly empty, but they decided to take Jesus to be tried before Pilate, the Roman governor, with a weak charge anyway.

We get a reminder of the nature of the religious leaders in verses 28-29. They were doing their very best to have an innocent man, the most innocent man who has ever lived, killed. However, by their rules if they went into the court of Pilate, a Gentile, that would make them unclean for a period, and that would keep them from being able to eat the Passover meal. Killing an innocent man was okay, but getting near a Gentile was taboo. Doesn’t that seem like something was off there?

It must have been irritating for Pilate to deal with people who believed that just by coming into the same room as him they would become contaminated and unacceptable to their God. I have it on rather dubitable authority that this is where the 6 feet apart rule for the pandemic originated. The religious leaders feared they’d get spiritual cooties if they got near Pilate in an enclosed room, so the only safe place was outdoors. Pilate was forced to meet them outside.

Pilate was a politician, and the last thing he wanted was trouble from the religious leaders of the Jews, who were the most influential people in the nation. So he met them outside and asked a most reasonable question. “What are you charging this man with?” Their answer wasn’t an answer at all. It was a classic statement of an idea that can really foul up an attempt at a fair trial. “If he were not a criminal, we would hot have handed him over to you.” Right. The police wouldn’t have accused this guy and he wouldn’t be on trial if he weren’t guilty. This is an attempt to get Pilate to buy into the “guilty until proven innocent” philosophy.

Pilate wasn’t buying it. He said, “Fine, if he’s a criminal and you can prove it, you have a law. Try him according to your own law.” In other words, if that’s all you’ve got, leave me alone. I want no part of this.” They could have tried and punished Jesus themselves. They could have had him flogged. They could have had him banned from the temple, thus making him persona non grata in the Jewish community. They could have put him in jail. But they knew if they did any of those things it would probably just make things worse for them. They’d likely fan the flames of Jesus’ popularity and leave him still able to make trouble for them. They wanted Jesus gone for good. They wanted Pilate to execute him. They needed Pilate to order it because the Romans did not allow them to use capital punishment on anyone. If they did what they wanted to do, kill Jesus, they’d be charged with murder by the Romans and could be executed themselves.

Can’t you almost hear Pilate’s exasperated sigh as he says, “Fine. Whatever. I’ll talk to him.” He’s had to deal with these guys for some time. He knew they were often clever schemers. He also knew, though, that they were politically influential and he needed to avoid making them mad. However, it is apparent that he felt this situation did not pass the smell test. If Jesus had committed some heinous crime deserving of execution, why weren’t they simply laying it out?

It is only when Jesus stood before Pilate that we get a glimpse of the one thing the religious authorities had charged Jesus with. Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Aha, this was what the authorities had come up with. They had told Pilate that Jesus had been claiming to be the King of the Jewish nation. From their perspective that was true. Jesus had affirmed that he was the Messiah. Their understanding of Messiah was that he would be a powerful and charismatic political ruler. After all, the Old Testament said he would sit on David’s throne. David was Israel’s greatest king, so clearly Messiah would be a king.

Furthermore they believed that Messiah would rule all nations. He would defeat Israel’s enemy. At that time their greatest enemy was their oppressor, Rome. So the leaders no doubt told Pilate that this wannabe king planned to lead a rebellion against Rome. After all, it was written in the Scriptures, right? Jesus had never, ever suggested such a thing. In fact, he stood for the opposite. He wasn’t about war and conquering, he was about peace.

The fact that Jesus claimed to be King of the Jews could have been seen by the Romans as insurrection. Rome designated who all the Jewish leaders would be. For someone to claim to be the rightful king of the Jews when the Romans hadn’t anointed him as such would have been viewed as rebellion. Add to that the claim that Jesus had designs on armed warfare against Rome and you’ve got a punishable crime. There was a group that were known as zealots who were radicals urging just such an armed rebellion. They had been more than a thorn in the side of the Roman authorities for some time. They would likely have viewed themselves as freedom fighters, but the Romans saw them as terrorists. If Jesus were anything like them, in the Roman view he would have been guilty. If it were true, execution would definitely be on the table in his case.

However, the fact that Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” suggests to me that he was dubious. If Jesus were claiming to be a king in violation of Roman law and if he were plotting armed insurrection, why weren’t the Jewish leaders laying out the case? Where was the proof? Where were the witnesses who heard him make his claims and could testify that he was preaching rebellion against Rome? All Pilate had was an assertion from the religious leaders that it was true, but with no evidence to back it up. So when he asked that question he was essentially saying, “Is this really what you’re about? Are you really trying to start a movement opposing Rome?”

Jesus’ response appears to me to display a little bit of humor. He essentially says, “Did you come up with that idea on your own? Or did you hear it from somebody else?” I think there’s humor at work there because Jesus knew exactly where the accusation came from. He knew there was no way Pilate would have come up with that idea. Pilate said, “Do I look like I’m Jewish to you?” In other words, of course I heard it from the religious leaders. But my question is what have you really done? I know all this stuff is bogus, so what have you actually done that has gotten these guys so fired up?

Then Jesus answered the accusation. He said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” In other words, yes, I’m a king. But I’m no threat to Rome. My kingdom is from another place entirely. He went on to point out if he were about political power and insurrection his followers would have fought. But they didn’t because that is not what he was about.

Laurie once went to a kingdom, a place that actually has a ruling king. The place was the South Pacific kingdom of Tonga. In their language Pule’anga Fakatu’I o’ Tonga. It is a kingdom of 170 islands currently ruled over by King George Tupou VI. If that king came here to the United States would anyone be bothered by the fact that he is a king who has a kingdom? Of course not. His kingdom is a long ways away and has nothing to do with our nation. Jesus told Pilate that, like King Tupou, he was a king and had a kingdom, but it was a long ways away and had nothing to do with Rome. As evidenced by his peaceful response to being arrested he clearly had no interest in a violent uprising.

Jesus is a king. But his kingdom is different than any ancient Roman could have understood. It is not like the kingdoms in this world. Or like the republics either. It is truly an other-wordly kingdom that has a very different form than anything we are used to. It is not a rival to any kingdom or nation on this earth. We will come back to this idea and consider some of its implications in a few minutes.

PILATE WAS A TRUE RELATIVIST

Pilate picks up on Jesus answer. It piques his interest. Oh, so you do claim to be a king? Jesus acknowledged that, but then to explain how different his kingship is from the way the religious leaders had portrayed it, he said, “I came into the world to testify of the truth.” Pilate’s response to that was, “What is truth?” Pilate would have fit right in with today’s culture. He is essentially saying, “There is no absolute truth.” Everybody has their own opinion about what the truth is, and they are all equally valid. Each person has their own truth. This is a lot like what we hear from our culture today. Truth is not one thing. It is always subjective and relative. This is the firm belief of our culture, even though it is a non-sensical, self denying statement. To say there is no one, absolute truth, is itself the one absolute truth. Since no such thing exists, the statement disqualifies itself.

Nevertheless, faith in that shibboleth stands. It is not hard to understand why. There are people like me who say there is one God who revealed himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, people who say there is one God but he did not reveal himself in Jesus, people who say there are many gods, people who say God is in all of us and in everything, people who say there is no God at all and people who say they don’t know anything about the whole deal for sure. Who is right? Who knows the truth? Pilate looked at his world and saw the same clash of competing claims and said the only reasonable position is to say “What is truth? No one knows. There is no one truth. When it comes to truth, one size doesn’t fit all.” Our culture as a whole has taken that position. Not just about the existence of God, but about pretty much everything having to do with morality and spirituality.

There are a number of problems with that position. I will point out only two today. Jesus was either a king or he was not. If he was, his kingdom was either of this world or it wasn’t. He either was plotting to lead a rebellion against the Romans or he wasn’t. There was truth and not truth about all of those things. To say there is no truth is, well, simply not true.

That leads to a second serious problem that came into play in the interaction between Jesus and Pilate. In verse 38 after interviewing Jesus Pilate told the Jewish religious leaders, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” He found him innocent, no threat at all to Rome. But he wasn’t willing to tell Jesus’ accusers to take a hike because he felt it would not have been politically expedient. Pilate tried to find some way to release Jesus without simply saying he was not guilty of anything. The Romans had a habit of releasing one prisoner at the Passover as a sop to the people of Judea. He thought he could use that to give Jesus a “get out of jail free” card. But that plan backfired badly. They shouted, “Don’t give us that guy. Give us Barabbas.” Unfortunately for Pilate, Barabbas was guilty of the kind of thing they were accusing Jesus of. He had been involved in insurrection against Rome and was seen as a terrorist.

We know how the story ends. In John 19:13 Jesus accusers were calling for Pilate to crucify him. He said, “Shall I crucify your king?” The chief priest answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” Man, talk about disingenuous. They had zero love for Caesar. In fact, they absolutely wanted Caesar to have no authority over them at all. But this was the politically correct response. It put Pilate in a bind. The chief priest was essentially saying, “We only respect Caesar’s authority. If you don’t do something about this guy who is challenging that authority, then you must not respect Caesar.”

Pilate caved. He knew Jesus was absolutely innocent. But John 19:14 says, “Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.” He agreed to have an innocent man tortured and executed. He ordered him murdered, and he did it not because it was right, because the accusations were true, but because it was the expedient thing to do. One huge problem with the idea that there is no truth is that it means there is also no right or wrong. There’s just what is and what you have the power to do. It opens the door to committing horrible acts because, after all, there is nothing wrong with them. Pilate went down in history as the perpetrator of one of the world’s great injustices because in the end, there is no truth so he just did what made life easiest for him. This is always the problem with the no truth position. If all is relative, then nothing is absolutely wrong or evil. There is no end to the horrors this idea can inflict on the human race.

IMPLICATIONS

JESUS HAS A KINGDOM

What is a kingdom? Webster’s dictionary says it is a state with a king as its head. It goes on to say it is the domain over which the king’s rule extends. So a kingdom is a place where the king is in charge, where what he wills is done. Does it matter to you what the will of King Tupou VI of Tonga is? No, we do not live in his kingdom. His will is irrelevant to us in the United States because he is not our king. His rule does not extend to us. It only matters to those who are in his kingdom.

In a sense, all of us have a kingdom. In my little life there is a realm where my will is done. If I decide that I don’t want to eat oatmeal for breakfast, then I don’t have oatmeal. If I decide that it is important that I get a hair cut today, then I go and get a hair cut. In the kingdom of Rick Myatt, Rick Myatt’s will is done. The problem with this, of course, is that Rick Myatt’s kingdom is continually bumping into the kingdoms of many other people. Where kingdoms bump into each other there is often friction, wars can even break out.

I learned before Laurie and I got married that my kingdom was being downsized when that union took place. I remember that I didn’t have strong ideas about how our wedding should go. I had some opinions, but they were limited, lightly held and for the most part easily discarded. But I recall there were a couple of questions that came up that I had some strong opinions about. On those questions Laurie asked me, “Do you want to have this in the wedding?” and I said I absolutely did not. Both of those things ended up in the wedding. I learned that my kingdom did not extend to all aspects of our wedding ceremony. It was an omen of things to come. It turns out that my kingdom doesn’t extend to everything in our married life together. There have been many negotiated settlements between my kingdom and Laurie’s.

Jesus Christ’s kingdom is that domain where his will rules, where what he wants is what is done. In one sense, that domain includes everything, for he is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the ruler of all. Ephesians 1:22 says God, “placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything.” However, for reasons of his own, he has allowed rebellion to exist in that all encompassing kingdom. He has allowed some angels to exert their own will and authority over some things on earth and he allows human beings to think they are masters of their own little kingdoms. He has boundaries, limits that he will not allow anyone, angel or human to cross, but within those boundaries they have some freedom to act according to their own will, even when it violates his will. Christ’s kingdom exists in the heavenly realms right now. Some day his kingdom will come here on earth. Jesus taught us to pray, “Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” His will is ruling in heaven, and when he returns it will be done here on earth.

Jesus said in Luke 17:21 when he was asked when the kingdom of God would come, “the kingdom of God is in your midst.” The kingdom of God existed in Jesus’ person because he always did the will of his Father. In his heart and life God the Father ruled over everything. There is also a sense in which the kingdom of God exists in us. To the degree that God rules in our hearts and our lives, there the kingdom of God exists.

JESUS’ KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

Jesus made clear to Pilate that his kingdom is other worldly. It is in another place. His kingdom is very different than this world’s kingdoms. Pilate understood that kingdoms of this world depend on worldly power. Jesus’ kingdom would only be a threat to Rome if he intended to use the power, the force of things in this world, to overthrow Rome. But Jesus’ kingdom operates in a totally new way. The power of this world has nothing to do with Jesus’ kingdom, a fact that too many Christians have forgotten throughout history, and continue to do so to this day.

Christ’s kingdom is totally different than this world. It is a beautiful thing. I once read a book in which the author talked about an interaction he had with a young woman that was his server at a restaurant in New York City. Somehow in conversation the fact that he was involved in ministry came up. She seemed to have a somewhat negative view of that. But then he told her he was about helping further God’s kingdom. She didn’t really understand the concept of Christ’s kingdom, so he explained what it is about. She was captivated by the idea. She said, “Why hasn’t anyone ever told me about this before?” She was turned off by religion, but she was powerfully drawn to the kingdom of Christ.

In the kingdom of Christ the will of Jesus is always done. This is the Jesus who taught that we should love our enemies, that we should return blessing for persecution and cursing. It is a place full of peacemakers. It is a place characterized by the kindness, gentleness and tenderness of Christ. A number of years ago Laurie and I went to the Disneyland Resort, which included the Disney California Adventure Park and the Magic Kingdom. At one point we went on the Radiator Springs Racers ride, which we enjoyed. Then we did a little shopping. We found a shirt for me that we both loved and decided to buy it. But when I went to pay for it I reached for my wallet, and it wasn’t there! I had lost my wallet. Our fun visit had just turned into a potential nightmare. There were many thousands of people at the park that day, and one of them likely had my wallet with my ID and credit cards in it. The lady in the shop asked where we had just been, we told her, and she called over to the Radiator Springs ride to see if my wallet had been turned in. No such luck. She told us to go to a building near the entrance to the park where security would have us fill out a form. We went there dutifully, but expecting it to be a waste of time. We stood in line for a bit with the other dimwits who had lost something valuable. Then they had me fill out a form in which I described the wallet and its contents and where I thought I had lost it. As I was filling out the form the person helping me took a phone call. He said, “Is your name Richard Myatt?” I said yes, then he said, “We have your wallet. They’re bringing it here and it will be here shortly.” Oh, man, what a relief. It was literally an answer to prayer. Several people told me I was one lucky dude, and indeed I was. Some honest person found that wallet. When I got it everything in it was in its place, nothing was missing. Like I said, it was an enormous relief and I felt like I had dodged a bullet.

In the kingdom of Jesus that would not be a surprise. It wouldn’t be a lucky thing. It would be the norm. It is what would always happen. In the kingdom of Jesus imagine you were driving on the freeway and encountered traffic. You realize that you need to get over to the right hand lane in order to take the next exit, but there is a solid line of cars. You have to get over, but there is no room. You turn on your turn indicator and immediately the people in the lane stop to make room for you to pull over. No one hugs the car ahead of them saying, “You’re not getting in front of me.” They only seek to serve and help you.

In the kingdom of Jesus you would never have to lock your doors in your house or your car. You would never fear what people might do to you, for what they will always do is love you and serve you and be kind to you. No one would ever be lonely, because people would always be around to love them. No kids would ever be made fun of or bullied. No one would ever go hungry. In the kingdom of Jesus we will never need passwords, so we will never have that irritating moment when we say, “Oh, no, I can’t remember my password,” something that happens to me on a regular basis. Who would not want to live in the kingdom of Jesus? It is a spectacular place that all of our hearts long for.

The kingdom of Jesus is very different than the kingdoms of this world. It is not about power, it is about love. It is not about getting and protecting ourselves, it is about giving and caring for others. It has totally different values than the kingdoms of this world. It has a different focus, for it is on the glory of God, not on self. It has completely different methods. It has different standards. It’s view of greatness in a person is not power, wealth, fame, or accomplishment. It’s view of greatness is humility and serving others. It is a kingdom of grace and love. It is a kingdom so different that it is hard to conceive, and the world does not understand it.

WE SHOULD SEEK JESUS’ KINGDOM

In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus addressed the issue of stress and worry. He said we should not worry about what we will eat or what clothes we will wear. That tells you something about what life was like for people back then. They didn’t stress about having a bigger house or a nicer car, or about their job, or what people might think of them. They worried about just having enough to eat, some clothes to wear and a place to live. Those were the big stressors in their day. Jesus simply said, “Don’t worry.” Whether it is the simple needs of those more difficult times or the far more complex needs and wants of our far more abundant lives, Jesus said, “Do not worry about any of it.”

Yeah, great, how are we supposed to do that? Don’t you love it when people say to you, “Don’t worry about it.” Oh, yeah, why didn’t I think of that. Okay, I’m not worrying now. How long does that last? About a nanosecond, then we’re right back to worrying. How did Jesus expect us to be able to do that? Jesus gave us two things that can help.

He told us in verse 33, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” What does it mean to seek his kingdom? Seeking means looking for something. Seeking is a very active consuming thing. Laurie and I went to the wedding of our niece, Joelle and her new husband Scott yesterday. It took place on a ranch outside of the metropolis of Granbury, Texas. So on Thursday we flew in to Dallas where we rented a car and drove to Granbury. That’s the short story, the long one is more involved. There were thunderstorms. And rain. Lots of rain. And it was dark. And we didn’t know where we were going. We first were reminded that the Dallas airport seems to be about 30 miles long. We complicated the whole thing by arranging to meet another niece, Michelle, and her family for dinner at a Cracker Barrel a few miles from the airport. We don’t know Dallas from the back side of the moon, so we were totally dependent on Google to direct us. We were both very tense, but we made it, had dinner and headed for our destination, again obeying Google’s every whim. Some of those whims seemed arbitrary or even non-sensical. But we were glued to them. At one point it took us around a curve that led onto an on ramp that was about as long as the driveway at our house. In the dark we didn’t realize that a pond had collected on that curve, a pool of water just slightly smaller than the Pacific Ocean. Suddenly our car was engulfed by a tidal wave. We couldn’t see a thing until just as I was trying to stop a truck flew by us, missing us by a good 10 inches. In the dark and the tidal wave we never saw him coming. He apparently thought we were a submarine. We continued following those directions for an hour. When we got to Granbury Google took us off the highway onto a dark road that purportedly would take us to our hotel, but it sure didn’t look like it. I told Laurie it felt like a scene out of a slasher movie. To our relief it actually did get us to our refuge.

I told you that because during that wet, dark drive we were seeking something. I assure you we were totally absorbed in the pursuit. We weren’t thinking about or worrying about anything else. In Christ we are already in his kingdom. We are his children. How then do we seek his kingdom? He meant we should seek to live in his kingdom and do all you can to bring about the rule of Jesus in this world. The biggest part of that is having him rule in our lives. He is our King, which means that what he wants is what should be done.

A few people told Laurie and me we were crazy for how we scheduled this weekend. The wedding we attended was at 5 PM yesterday on a ranch an hour outside Dallas. Our plan was to leave after the wedding, drive to the airport and catch a flight at 10:38 that would get in at midnight. Then we would get up and make it to church. No problem, right? Well, one problem. Laurie caught a cold. She did not feel well, so instead of staying for part of the reception we left not long after the wedding ceremony so we got to the airport earlier than planned. Laurie got the bright idea that maybe we could get on an earlier flight. I thought that unlikely, but there was a flight an hour earlier. But it was full. We checked anyway and they put us on standby. I still thought it was unlikely.. As we were standing in line we chatted with a woman in front of us who was doing the exact same thing we were. We learned she has 2 kids and was anxious to get home to them. Then we learned she lives in Carlsbad and is a believer who goes to the same church Toby and Anna do. They posted the standby list and we saw we were numbers 1 and 2 on it. Laurie said to me, “If we get on the flight and she doesn’t, do you think we should give place to her?” I told her I don’t know how the system works. But I thought if we could do that, we should. What I loved was in the little moment Laurie was seeking Jesus’ kingdom. In our kingdom, it’s about us. What we want, to get on the early flight was what should happen. In Jesus’ kingdom we give up self to love and serve another. It turned out that it was a moot point, because she was number 3 on the list and we all got on the flight. It got a little crazy, but we made it.

To seek something first means to make it the priority. The priority for me has to be orienting my mind, my heart, and my life so that they are about Jesus’ kingdom. That is the most important way I can bring about his kingdom here on earth. The cool thing is, if that’s really what I’m living for, I’m going to worry a lot less. Most of the things I would tend to worry about have nothing to do with the kingdom of Christ. If I’m focused on the kingdom, I won’t be worrying.

The second thing that helps us is Jesus said if we seek his kingdom, “All these things will be given to you as well.” He’s not saying God is going to make you rich and successful, that everything you touch will turn to gold. He meant you will have the food, clothing and shelter that you need in this world. The key here is having faith, believing that God will provide what you need. Jesus promised that he would do that. He’s not going to promise it and then not deliver.

As we trust in God’s promise and make seeking his kingdom the goal of our lives, we will usher in the kingdom of Jesus into at least one place in this world. In our lives the kingdom will begin to be manifested. And that kingdom is a beautiful place to live.