

“My Kingdom for a Kingdom”

a sermon by

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John 18:33-37

There is a line in Shakespeare’s play Richard III, that is quite familiar to many, whether they know its origin or not. “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse,” Richard cries, after being unhorsed in the climax of a battle he will eventually lose.

This line has become popular in all sorts of situations, but I had no idea how popular until I did a quick Google search on it. You may be surprised, as I was, at the things that popped up.

My kingdom for a bike ... my kingdom for some peace ... my kingdom for a cough drop ... my kingdom for a glass of milk.

I kid you not.

This phrase seems to sum up, for different people in different situations, a kind of desperation when the one thing they most want or need seems elusive. There is a certain amount of levity in the use of this phrase, but it can point to something more. The very imbalance in the trade – my kingdom for a horse? – highlights that desperation and the irony that sometimes we can have so much – as much as a kingdom – yet still not have what we sense we need, something simple and ordinary as a horse.

We have all found ourselves in situations in which this thinking comes naturally. I have all of these things around me – so many things – yet I don’t have the one thing I most want or need.

It may be frivolous – a dessert tray full of the finest pastries at a fancy restaurant and all I want is a scoop of vanilla ice cream; or it may be deeply serious – I have almost all the trappings of the perfect life, I’m just missing this one thing ...

There are many things that can lead us to this “my kingdom for a ...” thinking.

What use is all of this around me, we think, when I don't have this other thing? The thought can cross our minds at home or at work, at play, or even at church. We find ourselves wishing for that one elusive thing, the thing that we sense might make everything finally perfect, and we desire it so much that we are tempted to toss off everything else so that we might have it. I would give up anything – everything – my kingdom, in fact, for whatever that thing is that will fulfill, sustain, enrich, validate me.

This thinking can come to us at any time, but it is particularly interesting, I think, to us at the moment in which we find ourselves today. This is the second Sunday of Lent, a time of reflection and introspection for many, season in which many Christians choose to give up something on which they rely, something they enjoy, as a symbolic and spiritual act of solidarity with Jesus. We are also in the midst of some extraordinary times as a city and a nation, as we come to terms with a faltering economy and the need for some serious cutbacks in personal and corporate budgets.

We know something right now about giving things up, and about want. We are familiar with the balancing act of figuring out what is needed and what can go by the wayside.

But if we're honest with ourselves, we're not too happy about it. Whether you've given up sweets for Lent, or you've made significant cutbacks in your household budget, it's not something you are likely to enjoy.

You see, giving up things is hard for us humans. Even if we know it's for the good – if it is a spiritual or financial discipline, even if we think we might gain something from it, we don't really want to do it. Because we have ideas about the way things ought to be, ideas about what we want and need, and those ideas aren't easily altered. Plenty is good and want is bad, we have come to believe. Why have less when we can have more?

Our scripture passage this morning challenges our ideas about having and giving up. It takes us ahead on our Lenten journey, into the days just before Jesus' crucifixion. This is one of the more poignant and distressing times in Jesus' life. Having been rejected by the religious leadership and brought before local politicians for judgment, Jesus now faces interrogation by Pontius Pilate, a local official of the Roman government.

This is not exactly what one might expect for the one proclaimed the messiah and said to be a king. No doubt there were many who scratched their heads, wondering how exactly it had come to this – this man they had followed, witnessing miracle after miracle, surely there was some mistake. Surely he would not be put on trial and put to death.

Ironically, Pilate seemed to have been thinking just about the same thing. He had heard the complaint of the Jewish leaders – this man was calling himself a king – and was obligated to investigate. His primary concern was whether Jesus constituted a threat to Roman authority. To claim kingship in Rome was treason – punishable by death.

It doesn't take much for us to see that Pilate didn't really think Jesus was a threat. Jesus knew that too. Pilate makes it clear that it is the Jewish people who are concerned about Jesus' claims; to Pilate this simple man is no threat to Rome.

How could he be? This is no king; a king would have an army, and weapons. A king would have wealth and be surrounded by loyal followers – way more than 12 – and he would carry himself with authority, maybe even swagger. Jesus didn't have any of this. How could this Jesus be a king? He owned nothing, he seemed to want nothing. Pilate saw no reason to worry about this man and his claim of authority.

But then, we who know this story, we who are not so far away from celebrating that miraculous birth in a manger stall, we who are preparing our hearts for the betrayal and the crucifixion, we who hold our breaths in anticipation of Easter joy and the triumph over the grave, we know better. We know that this is no ordinary king.

We know about the poor unwed mother, the no room in the inn and the simple carpenter's life. We know about the bare feet and the plain robe, we know about the donkeys and the betrayal, the abandonment and the crucifixion. We know that there was little in Jesus' life that could be considered anything one might expect for a king.

Yet we know, at least on our good days, that this poor young man was, in fact, the king of kings. Against all of our human expectations, this one who suffered and was humiliated, who never sat on a throne or ordered an execution, the one who amassed nothing and gave up so much, this suffering servant was the only king we will ever need.

We know all that, we profess it and seek to live it, but sometimes, aren't we tempted to think ... "my kingdom for a kingdom?" I would give anything to be able to follow the regal, powerful, confidence-inspiring king? I have all this faith, and all this time spent going to church and praying and trying to lead a good life, but I still don't have it all figured out – it's still confusing and challenging, and downright difficult. Why can't it just be a little bit simpler?

It is tempting for us to want the trappings of royalty to reside in Jesus – the glory and the power made real and visible with trumpets and horses, with Jesus on the throne, issuing edicts and passing judgment. It certainly seems like it would be easier that way.

As abstract and complicated as our lives are, sometimes we all want things to be just a little bit more concrete, and we can't help but wonder if it wouldn't all be simpler if Jesus were the kind of king we read about in school.

The absolute ruler, ensconced in his glorious palace, surrounded by people eager to serve his every whim, making decisions about what is right and wrong, who is in and who is out, more concerned with power and status than anything else.

It is tempting to want this, because with this kind of king, what you see is what you get, right? You know where you stand, you know what the rules are and what the consequences of disobedience are.

You also know what the rewards are, and they can be great. Get into the favor of this kind of king, and there's no telling what you'll receive – money, power, influence – the sky's the limit.

If Jesus were just this kind of king, it's easy for us to think that things would be so much easier for us. If we did what we were supposed to do, then good things would surely come our way. And the people who did bad things would be swept up and dealt with expeditiously. Wouldn't that just be easier?

Well, sure it would be easier. It would be easier to have no season of Lent, to face no suffering, if there were no cross. It would have been easier for Jesus to say to Pilate, "oh no, I never said I was a king – who told you that – those crazy jokers – always trying to get someone in trouble. No I'm just a humble carpenter. Hail Caesar!" and then walk away to get on with what was left of his life.

But you know as well as I know that in this story – the story of our faith, the story of our God, and truly the story of our lives, it isn't about the easy way.

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite writers. Her honest writing about her own faith journey is both charming and gripping, and I appreciate the honesty with which she shares her own struggles. In her book, *Plan B*, she discusses how hard it can be for her to follow Christ. How the things Christ demands of his followers are so contrary to our human nature.

She wonders, "why couldn't Jesus command us to obsess about everything, to try to control and manipulate people, to try not to breathe at all, or to pay attention, to stomp away to brood when people annoy us, and then eat a big bag of Hershey's Kisses in bed?"¹

Why, indeed? Why can't Jesus just command us to be our base selves and not expect any more from us?

How tempting it is for us to think that it would be easier to follow a king who had no great expectations of us, didn't demand anything of us or call on us constantly to seek to transcend our natures, one who just let us be, rewarded the good with good and punished the bad. Tempting, yes. Realistic, no.

One of the hardest things about being a Christian is following Jesus. Because Jesus is unlike any other human, his rule unlike any other ruler.

Where earthly rulers value power and status, Jesus values compassion and love. Where earthly rulers pass down decrees from on high, Jesus sits on the floor with children to remind us what is important. Where earthly rulers surround themselves with money and influence, Jesus in his time of greatest power was dirt poor and all alone.

What we learn as we study Christ's life is that his real power was in the least likely place of all – it wasn't power in the form of armies, or piles of gold, or legions of people eager to do his

¹ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, (NY: Riverhead Books, 2005), 224.

bidding. This wasn't power for the sake of power, power to maintain position or to keep anyone comfortable, or even power to make things easier for anyone.

The power of Christ lay in the sacrifice of himself, the sacrifice of his life, to the glory of God, and for the love of humanity.

And as his followers, we know, sometimes way down deep, hidden away beneath layers of our own anxieties and insecurities, fears, concerns, desires and aspirations, somewhere way down there, we know that is where the true kingdom is.

Not in the material wealth or the fleeting glory of human praise, not in the power wielded for power's sake, or in control and manipulation over those weaker than us, but in the sacrifice, in the giving up of our ties to those things precious to us and giving it all over to God – all of it.

That is why, in the middle of Lent, in the middle of hard times, when we give things up, or things are taken from us, occasionally, miraculously, we get a glimpse of something more. We realize there is power in letting go and abundance in wanting less. As we grow in faith and discipleship, we find a richness in God's grace that surpasses any chocolate cake or pay raise we could ever have.

And so, maybe we're not so far off when we say, "My kingdom for a kingdom." Maybe the things with which we make up our own kingdoms – the stuff of our lives – really aren't worth as much as we think if we don't have the true kingdom – the kingdom of God – as our goal, our hope, our highest aspiration.

In my kingdom, my focus is on what I want. In God's kingdom my focus is on what another needs.

In my kingdom, I have to make sure I have enough. In God's kingdom, I make sure everyone has enough.

In my kingdom what matters most is how right I am. In God's kingdom, what matters is how kind I am.

In my kingdom, things go exactly the way I want them to. In God's kingdom, things go the way God intends them to.

My kingdom seems like the place I want to be. God's kingdom is the place I need to be.

My friends, the elusive thing we're searching for is right in front of us. It is God's kingdom. And it is ours to live into and enjoy. We need only lay aside our fascination with our own kingdoms and open ourselves to the king of kings to realize that here, in God's kingdom, is everything we ever needed, and so much more. Thanks be to God. Amen.