

Do You Ask This on Your Own? A sermon in response to John 18:33-38, 2 Samuel 23:1-7, and Revelation 1:4b-8 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, November 25, 2018.
(Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.)

I grew up in the PCUS – the “Presbyterian Church in the United States” – or what you probably called the “Southern Church.” East Hampton was in the “Northern Church” – or the “United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” The two denominations merged in 1983, while I was in college, and that’s when our current denomination was formed: the “Presbyterian Church in the United States of America” – or PC(USA).
+++ So when **I** went through Confirmation ((we called it Communicant’s Class – but it was very similar)) – when I went through it – a **FEW** years ago – the vows we took to become members were a little different than the ones we have now. +++ One of the vows included the statement that **“Jesus Christ was without sin.”** +++ Now, that’s pretty straightforward, isn’t it? Not too controversial? Kind of a “bedrock” doctrine in Christian theology? +++ Well – I wasn’t buying it. I really thought it **must** have been a sin when Jesus got so mad that he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple with a whip... I had it all worked out... This was his **ONE** sin – and it was a part of the divine plan all along – he would have **ONE** sin and that’s what made him human like the rest of us. +++ It made sense... to **ME!** +++ And – if you know me – even then – you know I am not someone to take a vow that I don’t believe. +++ +++ Well – You can imagine the anxiety this must have caused my pastor – not to mention *my parents* – as the Sunday approached when I would be called in front of the church to take my vows, and become a full-fledged, active, voting, member of the congregation. +++ But – fortunately – my questions were taken seriously. I wasn’t challenged – or told that I should just fall in line and say what I was supposed to say... I mean, there **WAS** an “Officially Correct” answer – *obviously* – but if I wasn’t there yet – if I needed more time to get my hands around it – that was OK. +++ The adults around me knew that **anybody** can just repeat orthodox doctrine – but **that’s** not what **faith** is built upon. **Faith grows when we encounter and respond to Christ in our own lives.** *Whatever* I was ready to profess, my pastor said – Jesus would still be there for me – would be there **with** me – as I grew to understand him more deeply. +++ In those last few weeks – as I talked with my parents, my mentor, and my pastor – as I was encouraged to **ASK MY OWN QUESTIONS**, I realized that **emotions aren’t sin** – even volatile emotions like anger; +++ and that it is **not sinful** to stand up to powerbrokers – or to protect the poor from being taken advantage of –... even to do so vigorously – without compromise – while proclaiming the Word of God. +++ **With a chance to explore MY questions** I also realized that Jesus didn’t actually **kill** or seriously **injure** anyone that day – he was **angry**, yes – and used righteous **force**, yes – but was not truly violent. +++ It gave me a chance to learn that following Jesus means more than sitting in church or in a classroom. It means **doing** things and **feeling** things that are honest – sometimes even **anger**. +++ **I didn’t have all the answers...** But then – do we **ever** have all the answers?? ... +++ But when the day arrived – I was able to stand up – and say before the entire congregation – that I believed that Jesus Christ was without sin. +++ +++ **(REPEAT:)** *Anybody* can just repeat orthodox doctrine – but **that’s** not what **faith** is built upon. **Faith grows when we encounter and respond to Christ in our own lives.**

One of the **many** things I love about the Gospel of John is how Christ encounters person after person – from the beginning of the Gospel to the end – and each time, he allows them to respond to him in **their** own way – ... to **ASK their own** questions and respond to him as they are ready. +++ Now, to be sure, John is about **faithfulness** – and there IS a right answer – an Orthodox Doctrine, if you will. It’s right there in the most beloved verses from John – perhaps in the whole Bible: John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone who believes in him** may not perish but may have eternal life.” +++ **THAT’S** the “right” answer – faithfulness. But Jesus knows that everyone is in a different place – and NOT everyone is ready to understand – or to accept him. **But they are forever changed by their encounters with him** – they **ask their** questions – they grow – and he accepts where they are in their journey. – He doesn’t scold them – or judge them... ... **if** they are **trying** to understand – **if** they are **ASKING THEIR OWN QUESTIONS**. +++ For example, **Nicodemus** was a Pharisee who believed Jesus **must** have come from God because of his signs, or miracles – but he’s not ready yet to believe more. When he talks to Jesus he can’t yet understand about having life **in the Spirit** – he only understands the earth and flesh. So **that’s** where Jesus meets him and begins teaching him to expand his mind: “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” +++

You'll also remember the **Samaritan Woman** whom Jesus meets at a well. She quickly understands that Jesus is a prophet and might even be the Messiah – but only because he knows everything about her life even though they've never met before. So when he offers her **Living Water** instead of the usual water from the well, ...she **tries** to understand what he's talking about, but she can't – she's not able to rise above the things of **this** world. But Jesus is patient with her – and eventually saves her whole town through her. +++ Time after time, in John, – Christ accepts where people are in their own faith journey – he encourages them to speak from **their own** heart – and he pushes them to grow. +++ +++ And he does this all the way to the end – even when he is at the lowest moment of his life...

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And that brings us, finally, to today's reading – and the life changing encounter that Pontius Pilate has... with Jesus Christ. +++ +++ Now – let's paint the scene a bit from Pilate's perspective. If ever anyone was wedged between a proverbial “rock and a hard place” – it was Pilate. As the Roman governor of Judea, his first job was to keep the peace and keep the Emperor happy. *Sometimes* that meant cracking down on the Jews – *sometimes* it meant giving them what they wanted. I don't think he really cared – as long as he could keep up that balancing act between Rome and the locals. Pilate had an uneasy truce with the High Priest and the Pharisees – “give them enough of what they want, and they'll keep things quiet.” +++ **And now, they wanted Jesus crucified.** +++ “Ok, then, let's make this quick and easy.” So, the first thing he asks Jesus is “Are you the King of the Jews?” If Jesus says “Yes,” that's a guilty plea – because NOBODY could claim to be the king of any Roman Province except the Emperor himself. It was a capital offense. +++ This was a question with a Right and Wrong answer. Easy! With any luck, Pilate can have this whole thing done in time for lunch. +++ But Jesus turns the tables on him, ((like he *always* does)). – And with one sentence, Pilate finds *himself* to be the one on trial. +++ “Are you the King of the Jews?” And Jesus answers, “**Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?**” – **Are YOU ...looking ...for a King?** – A King – but not a King of **this** world? +++ Jesus is not talking to Pilate the governor – Pilate the one who holds Jesus' own life in his hands. Jesus is talking to Pilate **the man** – the flawed child of God – who **wants** to do justice – **wants** to wash his hands of the abuse of power. Christ is inviting him to think **for himself**... **beyond** the party line – **beyond** orthodox doctrine – and face a truth that's beyond anything he's ever considered before. +++ +++ In my mind's eye, I see Pilate standing there with his mouth open for a minute, not knowing what to say... A Kingdom – but not of **this** world. What does **that** look like? +++ +++ ... Then it all comes crashing back to him – “I've got to get this guy to confess.” +++ “So, you **ARE** a King?” (Thinking: “What's the difference? *This world, another world*, as long as he says he's a king, I've **got** him”). +++ But Jesus won't let him go that easily: “YOU say that I am king. For **THIS** I was born, and for **THIS** I came into the world, to testify to the **TRUTH.**” +++ **CHRIST IS THE KING** – but not a king who needs a palace, or a throne. He is not a king that raises taxes or commands an army. Christ is the King of Eternity. He is the King of the TRUTH. +++ +++ And Pilate realizes he has to rethink everything that has seemed so reliable in his world... Power... Kingdoms... Truth... And so the ultimate **worldly** leader asks Jesus, his humble prisoner – “What **IS** truth?” +++ And for a moment – he is a student at the master's knee. +++ +++ +++

But reality is reality. Pilate is still a coward – he still fears the Emperor – still fears losing control of the situation. So he turns Jesus over to be flogged and crucified. But, he has an inscription placed on the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” When the chief priests demanded that Pilate change the sign to “The man who **said**, ‘I am the king of the Jews,’” he refused to make the change. +++ Pilate knew:: **The King was being crucified – and for this he had come into the world.**

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And now – 2000 years later – Christ invites us to ask **OUR own** questions. To live our faith – **beyond** the easy answers – **beyond** repeating back what someone expects us to say we believe:: He calls us to ask:: “What does it **mean** for me to live in Christ's kingdom? **NOW?**... **TODAY?**... What am **I** called **to do** – to keep the Everlasting Covenant I've inherited – and to proclaim the Gospel of Christ? **What does the Reign of Christ look like?**” Faithful people have tried to answer these questions for a very long time – like in **David's** final words that we read today: “One who rules over people **justly**, ruling in the **fear of God**, is like the **light** of morning, like the **sun** rising on a cloudless morning, **gleaming** from the rain on the grassy land.” +++ And in **Revelation**, “when the King of Eternity comes with the clouds; **every** eye will see him, **even those who pierced him**; and on his account

all the tribes of the earth will wail.” +++ The GOOD NEWS is – Christ is the King!:: The King of Truth,... the King of our Salvation,... the King of Eternity. As his followers, our lives should reflect his Kingdom in *this* world – “On *Earth* as it *IS* in Heaven.” +++ Ask your questions – watch Christ change you – +++ and let the Good News shape your life:: Christ is King!

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.