

## **“The Highest Authority”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

November 24, 2024 - Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Reign of Christ/Thanksgiving Sunday

[2 Samuel 23:1-7; John 18:33-37](#)

“And who made you boss?” was a question I often heard being asked by my older brothers as I was growing up. Being the youngest of three siblings, I was in no position to be boss, and yet, I do admit, I tried to be so on more than one occasion. I also recognize that trying to assert this authority in my household was silly, not just because, as the youngest brother, I was in no natural position to be boss, but because, as we all knew very well, Mom was the boss!

My mother did many things well, but one thing she excelled in was being the boss of our household, a skill she learned, unfortunately, from her own difficult childhood, during which she had to serve as boss to her own three siblings after their father inexplicably just left them and their mother one day, never to return home. And so while my grandmother was at work so as to provide for her family, my mom would oversee the day-to-day operation of the household.

As I said, she did this well, which is perhaps why, when serving in the Air Force after finishing high school, her superiors tried to get her to become a drill sergeant. She never did, but she did put her boss skills to good use later as she led her own family. While my brothers and I might boss each other around, and we did, we always knew who the real house boss was, and we challenged this arrangement only at our own peril.

Today’s readings tell us of other bosses, King David in the reading from 2 Samuel and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate in the reading from John, who ruled not just over their households, but over entire realms.

In the reading from 2 Samuel, we are given the last words of David, who was far from perfect, as learned this summer in a series of readings from the Books of Samuel, but who ruled over Israel as their greatest king. What made him great, according to his own final, prophetic words, was that he ruled justly under the higher rule of a just God, and his leadership, like the bright morning sun, spread light upon the land and its people.

The second of today's readings, from the gospel of John, tells us about a descendent of David, Jesus, who had been arrested by the political and religious authorities of his day, as they considered him to be a threat to their own rule over people, and was brought by them to the one who had the highest authority in the land at that time, Rome's governor of Judea Pontius Pilate. He was indeed the head honcho in Jerusalem and the region around it, being chosen by the Roman emperor for the tasks of maintaining Roman control and taxing the people to support the empire and its rule. To show the people who was really in charge, Rome built a fortress on the grounds of the temple in Jerusalem, which towered over the temple itself, and the Roman governor, who was usually at the city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, came into Jerusalem for festivals and other holy days carrying with him the vestments that the high priest had to wear to perform sacred rituals at the temple. As the Roman governor had power over the activities of the temple and its leadership, he asserted authority over every aspect of the lives of the Jewish people in Judea, including their worship of God, which was the most important part of their identity. Anyone considered by the governor to be a threat to Roman control over the temple or any other aspect of Roman rule could be convicted and punished by him, and so Pilate sought to determine if Jesus of Nazareth was such a threat in need of removal. So Pilate asked him, "Are you King of the Jews, a challenger to my authority?"

Jesus didn't take the bait and did not challenge Pilate's authority, but rather stated that he did not seek to have an earthly kingdom, to rule over others as Rome did, but that his reign was in the heavenly realm of spirit and truth.

Jesus claimed not to be a human king, as was his ancestor David, to command armies as David did, or to lead anyone in arms, and so, on one hand, he was no threat to Pilate or Roman rule; but on the other hand, by claiming heavenly power beyond all earthly powers, to reign from a perch even higher than the tower of the Roman fortress overlooking the temple in Jerusalem, he was *entirely* a threat to the Roman system. With his truth, Jesus threatened the Roman way, the way of all empires, to subdue and conquer people, to take from them and to threaten them with destruction should they not be submissive. For the truth of Jesus opposed the way of empires, and called people to live in a different way, with love for God and love for neighbors being life's governing principles.

Whose way do we follow? Do we give our allegiance to human rulers above the one whose reign of truth leads us to love? Will we continue the destructive ways of empires in taking from others to expand our own riches and power? Will we use our energies to seek the submission of people to our way of living or worshipping or understanding the world?

Or will we live under the reign of Christ, the Boss of bosses, and follow his heavenly truth that living with selfless love will lead to the growth of light and life for all people? I hope each of us will choose this way, and that we as a household of faith would ever be guided by it. I hope that, as our shared journey leads us to live together and in our community with the way of love guiding us, we would discover great joy in loving more perfectly and our hearts being filled with Christ's peace, and that, with gratitude, we would ever rejoice, give thanks, and sing.

May Christ reign in our hearts today and always. Amen.