

“The king who carried no sword”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 18:33-37

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

One of my favorite shows growing up was *The Andy Griffith Show*. And no, I was not alive when the show aired. I watched it as part of Nickelodeon’s “classic” TV lineup, which should make those of you were alive when it aired feel *really* good. In the iconic small town of Mayberry, Andy Taylor is a good-natured sheriff and a widower raising his young son. One of the special things about Sheriff Andy was that, in the television era of westerns with good guys shooting bad guys, Andy didn’t carry a gun.

There’s an episode where Barney asks Andy why, and Andy answers, “When a man carries a gun all the time, the respect he thinks he’s getting might really be fear. So I don’t carry a gun because I don’t want the people of Mayberry to fear a gun. I’d rather they would respect me.”

It wasn’t that Andy was against guns. There are a few episodes where he uses a gun. It’s just that he sought his power in a different place.

Andy was no typical sheriff. This would be like King Arthur refusing to pull the sword from the stone. Sheriffs have guns; kings have swords.

It’s what we expect of the world, and it was what Pontius Pilate expected. And so when Pilate was told that Jesus was making himself out to be the new sheriff in town, the king of the Jews, he could think only one thing: this man is leading an armed rebellion. For Pilate there was only one kind of power, and it was the power of might.

In Pilate’s world, Jesus just didn’t compute. He couldn’t make sense of this man who carried no sword, desired no empire. This man who rode into town on a donkey, who chose day laborers and outcasts as his ambassadors, who spent his time playing with children and feeding the hungry, a king who would claim the cross as his throne and thorns for his crown.

Jesus tried to tell Pilate that he was a different kind of king. He tried to tell him that his kingdom was not from this world; if it were, his followers would fight to protect him. But as a different kind of king, Jesus refused the world’s primary tool to establish and keep power; he refused violence. His power was not in might, but in truth—the truth that God is love (John 3:16), and that God is here not to conquer, but to save.

It may be that a part of Pilate wanted to believe. But in the end, he just couldn’t. He couldn’t believe in this new kind of power, this new kind of king, who carries no sword.

He wasn't the only one. When a crowd came for Jesus, armed with swords and clubs, Jesus' own disciple Peter took out his sword and attacked them. It was Jesus who placed his hand on the sword and lowered it, sighing with grief, because Peter still did not understand.

I wonder if *we* really believe it. Over all these centuries, how many people have been killed or oppressed in the name of Jesus? How many wars waged, how much hate spewed, because we thought we needed to take up arms and defend Christianity? How many preachers in this very hour are promising the faithful wealth and prestige, while calling down God's wrath on sinners and enemies? How many of us have equated the success of Christianity with endowments, and buildings, and filled pews, and political power? Because we still think that Jesus comes with a sword and gleaming crown; because we still equate power with might.

It's no wonder. That's our world. A world that sends armed troops to meet starving refugees. A world of people scrambling over each other to get ahead, not caring who they step on or who gets left behind. In such a world, a king without a sword just doesn't seem very powerful.

And so we put a sword back into his hand. We make God violent, because we're violent. We twist the gospel into a promise of prosperity and a threat of judgment because that's still the only rubric we know. We take this sacrifice of love—the cross—and we turn it into a “legal mechanism of punishing Jesus in our stead” because all we know are “punitive relationships” (David Lose). And when we hear Jesus say that he has come to bring a sword (Matt. 10:34), we miss the point—which is that the only sword worth carrying is the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), the truth that only love can save us.

Jesus came to help us believe that these aren't just nice ideas; they are the truth. Violence only begets more violence. The mighty always fall. “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword,” says Christ (Matt. 26:52). Jesus' life is the only testimony we need. He stands before us, the king who, in the words of David Lose, “demonstrated power through weakness, who manifested strength through vulnerability, who established justice through mercy, and who built the kingdom of God by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world, taking its pain into his own body, dying the death it sought, and rising again to remind us that light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hate, and that with God, all good things are possible.”

I want to share with you a story of a man named Christian Picciolini, who was bullied as a child and didn't believe yet. He shares his story in a TED Talk on NPR. One day, this lonely kid was challenged to a fight by one particularly relentless bully. He started circling Christian, talking trash. But when he closed in, Christian's instinct kicked in. He punched him so hard that he fell to the ground with a bloody nose. For a moment, Christian hesitated. Then he jumped on top of the bully and pummeled him.

As I listened to the story, I thought: “Good for him. He stood up to the bully!” But Christian says that it was that moment, that choice, that ruined his life.

He became the bully. He started acting out, skipping class, using drugs. Anything to give him that high of power again. And one day, he's approached by a man who says he can teach him power. That man was Clark Martell, and he was America's first neo-Nazi skinhead leader.

Christian was just one of many vulnerable youth Martell recruited. He was taught to blame Jews, people of color, and immigrants. He became violent. He stockpiled weapons. And 25 years ago, he wrote and performed a white supremacist song that was later found in the possession of a young white nationalist who walked into an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed nine innocent people.

But something changed in Christian's life. At 19 years old, he fell in love. They got married. They had a baby boy. And as Christian held his son in his arms for the first time, he felt a different kind of power. Far from feeling mighty, he felt scared and humbled, like he was suddenly as tiny and innocent as the babe in his arms. What felt big was the universe—the same one that had always shut him out, the one he had tried to conquer, but now it was inviting him in, and it left him breathless it was so beautiful, and he loved it. He was a father. His purpose was not himself, but another.

He opened a music store. All kinds of people came. Jews. African Americans. Immigrants. They knew who and what he was; yet they chose to talk to him. And as he got to know them, he found that he had a lot in common with them. He says, "I started to receive compassion from the people that I least deserved it from when I least deserved it." And that changed him, he says: "The demonization that had been living in my head started to become replaced with humanization."

Christian is now the founder of the Free Radicals Project, dedicated to helping members and their families disengage from hate groups. His life is a testimony to the power of love over hate.

I ask you: what if this man, this Christian, who bears responsibility for the hurt and death of so many, could go back all those years, stand on that playground again, go back to that moment of hesitation, and instead of leaping on his enemy, lower a hand of friendship? And what if I could tell you that that is precisely what Jesus Christ offers us today? To go back, and make it clean. To save you and me and everyone. To save those nine precious people in the Charleston church. All we have to do is believe. Believe in the king who carries no sword. **Amen.**