

Wishbones and Backbones (NUCC)
John 18:33-37
NUCC Traditional
18 November 2018

*PRAY

A few years ago, I flew from Dallas to Houston for the day to attend a luncheon to celebrate my aunt's 60th birthday. I was picked up at the airport by my parents. I thought they would be excited to see me, but I found my parents oddly quiet from the airport to the restaurant. It was my mother who spoke first. She said that she wanted me to know something so that I wouldn't be caught by surprise when I was around my family later that day at the luncheon. It was as if she was searching for just the right words and then suddenly just blurted out: "Dawson, we're not cooking Thanksgiving this year, we're buying it from Central Market. I know Thanksgiving is a big deal to you and I thought you should know now so that you can adjust your expectations."

A store-bought Thanksgiving? Not exactly the "Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving" I had hoped for.

You see, other than crushing all of my hopes and dreams about having a traditional Thanksgiving, by buying your entire Thanksgiving meal from a store, you get the turkey meat pre-sliced, you don't actually get a turkey. And without the turkey, you don't get a wishbone.

In 15th Century Europe, it was thought that the wishbone could be used to predict the weather. Nowadays, once removed from the turkey or chicken, the wishbone is dried and then held between the little fingers of two opposing "wishers". Once the wish has been made the bone is pulled by each person. The wisher who breaks off a larger section of bone is assumed to have their wish granted. Alternatively, the winner of

this contest may choose to transfer the fragment of the wishbone, along with the wish, to a person of his choosing.

Northland College principal John Tapene has offered the following words from a judge who regularly deals with youth.

“Always we hear the cry from teenagers, ‘What can we do, where can we go? My answer is this: Go home, mow the lawn, wash the windows, learn to cook, build a raft, get a job, visit the sick, study your lessons and after you’ve finished, read a book. Your town does not owe you recreational facilities and your parents do not owe you fun. The world does not owe you a living, you owe the world something. You owe it your time, energy and talent so that no one will be at war, in sickness and lonely again. In other words, grow up, stop being a cry baby, get out of your dream world and develop a backbone, not a wishbone. Start behaving like a responsible person. You are important and you are needed. It’s too late to sit around and wait for somebody to do something someday. Someday is now and that somebody is you!”

Pontius Pilate, the local governor, a kind of “Chief of Police” for the Roman Empire in Jerusalem, was caught in a similar situation. The powerful members of the Sanhedrin (think Naples City Council) brought Pilate a prisoner, a man they accused of endangering Roman rule, by proclaiming himself to be some sort of ruler and thus outside of Roman law. The Sanhedrin accused Jesus of proclaiming himself “King.” Politically that was treason — a flagrant flaunting of Caesar’s rights and rule. To declare himself “King of the Jews” not only disregarded the ruling power of Rome. It provided potential fodder for the local rebellion and even violent, militant reactions of the Jewish population in Jerusalem and beyond.

When the Roman prefect asks his Jewish prisoner if he is royalty, Jesus redefines the place and space of royalty. His identity must be understood and embraced and believed on two levels. Yes, Jesus is a king. And yet Jesus’ realm is “not of this world.” It is necessary to master some new language skills in order to speak truly about Jesus’ reign.

When Pilate asked Jesus if he was “a king,” he was asking about a role defined by worldly expectations. Do you command an army? Are you a political rival? Are you planning to overthrow the existing government? Are you trying to overpower those currently in control?

Jesus replied by assuring Pilate that his “realm” was “not of this world.” The worldly-wise and world-weary politico Pontius Pilate could not possibly comprehend such a claim. The demands, dilemmas, and deference ordered by this world were all that Pilate, and all the other ‘Pilates’ of this world, could understand.

Jesus’ royalty is decidedly quirky and unconventional in the eyes of the world. But it’s the same today as it was in those days. We follow the ways of one who was never powerful, who never brought opposing powers to their knees, and who was crucified on a cross as a common criminal.

Jesus’ proclamation as “king” of a realm that has its final seat of power not in this world forewarns disciples that faith in Christ does not necessarily guarantee success in the eyes of the world.

It is little wonder that Pilate, the consummate political animal, collapsed under the demands of the crowds and ordered Jesus’ crucifixion. Although he harbored no ill-will toward Jesus, and had plenty of animosity toward the Jewish authorities accusing him, Pilate had far too much political capital at stake to risk taking an unpopular stand. Pilate decided to go along in order to get along.

So, my friends, as we round the bend toward a new year, I believe we are faced with this important question: **Do you have a wishbone or a backbone?** You see, a

wishbone breaks easily. A wishbone-kind of theology means that you will wait for someone else to address issues of justice like poverty and homelessness.

Or do you have a backbone? Do you recognize that we are living in a delicate place where we are working for the reign of Christ to come to fruition, but we know it isn't here yet? We are in that place that author Robert Benson calls "between the dreaming and coming true."

There is an interesting story that comes from World War II. Many years ago, when Hitler's forces occupied Denmark, the order came that all Jews in Denmark were to identify themselves by wearing armbands with a yellow Star of David. The Danes had seen the extermination of Jews in other countries and guessed that this was the first step in that process in their country. The King did not defy the orders. He had every Jew wear the Star and he himself wore the Star of David. He told his people that he expected every loyal Dane to do the same. The King said, "We are all Danes. One Danish person is the same as the next." He wore his yellow star when going into Copenhagen every day in order to encourage his people. The King of Denmark identified with his people, even to the point of putting his own life on the line.

An amazing and inspiring story, don't you think. However, there is one problem—it's not true. It's an urban legend. It's been around for a long time and told thousands of times over. It's a great image, a king identifying with the people.

Just as we must be mindful of the images and understanding of power in our day and in our culture. The idea that power must crush those without power. The idea that those on the margins, however that margin is defined, are to be kept out.

Let today be the day we choose not to give in to the fear-mongers of our day. Let today be the day when we choose faith. Let today be the day when we choose to be people who have backbones, not wishbones; because:

“You are important, and you are needed. It’s too late to sit around and wait for somebody to do something someday. Someday is now and that somebody is you!”