

“In Whose Service?”

Psalm 100 & Matthew 25:31-46

Sunday, November 26, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline

Today we celebrate ‘Christ the King’ Sunday. This is the Sunday in our church calendar in which we have the chance to show our gratitude and allegiance to Jesus, whom we proclaim Lord. Also this Sunday we are not in the midst of a sermon series. When we don’t have a sermon series going on, then I have some more latitude to choose whatever scripture we’re hearing for the day. I don’t like that. I feel like when I’m given the reins to choose scripture I just end up picking one of my ‘go to’ choices. You know how you may have a favorite passage, so do I. And I thought, I could pick Micah 6:8, or the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, or the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. But I thought to myself ‘no, I can’t do that, I need to be guided by scripture, not guide scripture choices. There is a resource for preachers called the ‘revised common lectionary’, which provides scripture readings for every Sunday of the year on a three year cycle. I thought to myself, I’ll just see what the lectionary text is this week. That way I won’t just end up picking Matthew 25. So I open up the lectionary, and wouldn’t you know it – Matthew 25 is the reading. So instead of arguing with God, who clearly chose the scripture for today, I decided to just go with it.

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer

him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,[g] you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

We just celebrated Thanksgiving, a time to give thanks for everything in our lives. I spent my thanksgiving with my in-laws, spent a great time together as a family, got to celebrate my daughter's first Thanksgiving and got to give thanks for the fact that she's learning to clap and has started waving. But beyond my family, there are tons of other things that I'm thankful for. I'm thankful for the Beatles. I love their music. I think, and this may be controversial, that the White Album is the best album of all time. I'm thankful for television. My wife and I recently watched the most recent season of the Great British Baking Show, and we tore through it and loved it, even though my favorite baker didn't win. I'm thankful for my phone, for the opportunity to call friends and family, but also for the ability to waste time on Facebook and the internet. I'm thankful for my job, for the opportunity to come here and be a part of this community, to experience this calling here at Covenant and to explore life together. I'm thankful for all of those things, but sometimes we can take thankfulness a step further. Some days, when I'm tired or cranky, all I want to do is to hide in my basement and watch 10 hours of tv. I want to hide away from the world and want to exist solely in the dimension of Netflix. I am embarrassed at the amount of time I spend on my phone, on the near constant proximity that I have to my phone. The pseudo-panic that happens when I

realize I'm not sure where it is. There are times when the things we are grateful for become the things that we worship. I don't even want to go into the things that I have said about stuffing over the past 72 hours. If you want to talk about idolatry, then all you have to do is talk to me about stuffing. We are torn in so many different directions in this world. The things I have named are just the tip of the iceberg. How many people wake up and immediately turn their attention to the politics of the day. It's good to stay informed, but at a certain point the pursuit of political news stops being about interest, and starts being a worship. What is the line between patriotism and idolatry? Is our worship of our country so much so that it supersedes our love for what is good, holy and righteous? How many of us have made idols of political party affiliation, willing to overlook the sins of our party, because 'at least they aren't the other guys'?

What is it in our lives that we put ahead of anything else? Today we are reminded that it is Christ the King Sunday. A day in which we declare our allegiance to a power that is higher and greater than whatever we can serve here. It's a difficult thing to re-center ourselves around something that, while important to our lives, is not necessarily always front and center in our worlds. The TV is always in front of us, our phones are in our pockets. All of the idols that we worship are so ever present in our lives in ways that our faith just does not seem to be. This is just the reality of life, it can be so easy to get sucked into those things that glow in the dark and yell at us, and so easy to forget that there is a deeper spiritual life available to us. I know I fall prey to this all the time. I want to take the time to center myself in the morning and the next thing I know I'm ascending mount email. So how do we remind ourselves who we are called to serve? How do we remember who we proclaim as king? Part of it is what you are doing today. By being here and spending time with your faith community you are showing that you have placed some priority on nurturing your faith life. But coming to church is not the only way in which we remind ourselves of our allegiances. We can engage in a regular life of prayer. Even if the prayer said is brief, or casual, it will remind us of our ongoing life as disciples of Christ. We can read the Bible, just a couple verses, or a book or chapter we haven't spent much time with. Sometimes it is as simple as closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths, taking that moment to block out the noise and hustle of the world. But what does it mean to declare allegiance to Christ the King?

To talk of Christ as king is to radically redefine what we mean when we say the word 'king'. In this story, Jesus talks about the coming of the king at the end of all time. A powerful king, sitting on the throne of glory surrounded by angels. A king who can gather all the nations before him. This is a paragon of greatness, a king surrounded by majesty and power. So, in his splendor and majesty the king establishes what is valuable. The sheep on the right hand are rewarded for completing a list of tasks. Jesus says " for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me". It is in this that we can divine the root of the king's passion; the heart of who we call king. In declaring our allegiance to Christ as King, that is what we are declaring ourselves for. The heart of a servant lives in the heart of our king, and so to serve that king we too must open our hearts to serve who are the lost, the least, the last. To serve Christ the King we must be willing to look outside of our comfort zones and look outside of the places that we feel safest and most secure, and look towards the margins and with an eye towards radical inclusion. And while we may all enjoy spending hours in front of the television, and days wasted staring at Facebook, there is a deeper sense of satisfaction when we take the next step to serve Christ. There is the intrinsic satisfaction of labors done in service of something greater than yourself. There is the satisfaction that you know that your work has gone towards creating a better world for everyone; that the way in which you live and the people you touch are better for knowing you. In choosing to serve Christ, you are choosing to serve something greater and more significant than your television, or your political party, or even your country. In choosing to serve Christ you are choosing to work towards a beautiful and open kingdom.

To serve Jesus is not a passive or casual thing, it is not something that we declare and then leave, it is like a fire that requires oxygen to keep burning. Notice that when the king comes in his glory the qualifications are not "you prayed the most often, you went to church the most, you memorized the most bible verses, you believed perfectly and never expressed doubt". The rewards for the sheep were for a life of active faith lived in identification with the outcast, the stranger, the hungry and the sick. This is a kingship unlike any other before. There is a high level of dedication that comes with this

declaration. Declaring Christ the king does not mean a life of quiet contemplation and rumination on the teachings of an ancient rabbi, but means an active life of faith that spreads ever outwards. If we are to serve the king, then we are to serve the least. But this is more than mere service. Jesus said “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal spent ten years of his life living in the peasant fishing community of Solentiname. While he was there he founded a Christian community and recorded conversations that they had about the Gospel. In talking about this passage one member, Alejandro said: “We’re always believing that Jesus Christ is a distant person, different from the people. And it seems to me very important, as it’s been important to me for a long time: that even if a person is a snob, that person is God, no matter who. God identifies himself with human beings; God makes no distinction. And that’s what makes revolutionary love spring up.” Another member of the community, Natalia added “God identifies with the needy. With the poor. With the humble.” To which Alejandro replied “The tortured ones, the starving, the ones from wretched districts like Acahualinca, they’re the ones who can best understand injustices. The ones who are suffering them are God. That’s very simple, isn’t it?”

Jesus did not merely suggest that he had a heart for those on the outside, he specifically said that he is the one on the outside. He is everyone on the outside. He is gay teenager living on the street because he was kicked out of his house. He is the woman who is harassed in the workforce with no avenue to report her harasser. He is the Guatemalan laborer told to ‘go back to Mexico’. He is the Muslim who is told to leave a restaurant because ‘we don’t serve terrorists’. These are not just the people that Jesus cared for, these people are Jesus. When we think about the injustices that are committed in this world, the people who are trampled underfoot in a society that wounds many and privileges few. When we think about those who are deemed unfit and unworthy we need to remember the words that Alejandro said: “The ones who are suffering them are God. That’s very simple, isn’t it?”