

Christ the King?

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John 18:33-37

Sunday, November 22, 2009

For those of you who follow the lectionary, today is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, begins a new lectionary cycle. Today is called Christ the King, or Reign of Christ, Sunday.

I've never preached a sermon on Christ the King Sunday, so instead of choosing another passage, I thought I'd challenge myself and preach the lectionary text for today. I don't like the patriarchal language the name Christ the King implies, and I view Jesus in more feminist ways, so I knew it would be quite a challenge. I emailed a couple of ministers for some tips, and I received only one response. He wrote, "I always try to have one of the other ministers preach on that Sunday, for just the reasons you state." So I was out of luck.

In my research, I did learn that Christ the King is a fairly new development in the church. It doesn't bear the history of many long-held traditions such as All Saints or Christmas or Easter, and it doesn't have the biblical backing of these celebrations. Pope Pius XI brought Christ the King Sunday into the church's liturgical year in 1925. It was a time of focusing inward and rebuilding after World War I, and people regarded some humans as saviors. The pope thought that the time was right for a refocusing on the One who is ultimately the savior in our lives as people of faith. Hence, Christ the King Sunday came about.

I don't know if you ever read the comic strip "Hagar the Horrible." It depicts a Viking with his family, and all that goes on in his day-to-day life of raiding castles. He lives in a country with a king, and he's sometimes visited by the king's messengers, who demand various things of him.

In a recent strip, a messenger, backed by a burly guy holding a spear, knocks on Hagar's door. The messenger announces that everyone is expected to contribute to the king's plan to build an expensive, world-class museum where his subjects can view great works of art. Now, if the king says do it, you do it. But Hagar does ask a simple question: "Why is he doing that?"

The messenger replies, "His five-year old kid draws stuff in kindergarten." So, yes, the word *king* does have those "I'm in charge" connotations.

I like Lamar Williamson's exegesis of today's passage. He points out that of the four gospel accounts of Jesus' trial before Pilate, John's is the longest. The question Pilate asks Jesus is the same in all of them: "Are you king of the Jews?" A claim to be king would be seen by the Roman authorities as rebellion.

Jesus answers the same in all four gospels, although in John's, he's a bit wordy. In the other three, Jesus responds, "You have said so." In John he answers only after a substantive interchange with Pilate.

The governor wants to know what Jesus has done. According to Williamson, at this point "Jesus takes control of the interview. Instead of telling the governor what he has done, he reverts to the original question about kingship."

I think it is interesting that in this account, when Jesus is asked if he is king of the Jews, he avoids the question. He asks if Pilate is asking this based on what others have told him. But later Jesus talks about his kingdom being from another world. So Pilate picks up on that and says, "So you are a king?" But then Jesus finagles again. "You say that I am a king."

Jesus isn't comfortable with this term, either. In fact, he never calls himself a king. It's others who call him a king. When he was crucified for being king of the Jews, he was forced to wear a crown of thorns and a purple robe, which made for an unforgettable picture. In Matthew and Mark, the crown and robe are removed as soon as the soldiers finish making sport of him. In John, Jesus still wears them when Pilate brings him out. "Here is your king!" says the governor as he pushes Jesus out before the crowd.

So on this day, when we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, let's look a little at what that means. Many of you are familiar with the Open Door Community in Atlanta. It's considered a Protestant Catholic Worker House, whose residents work with homeless folks and those in prison.

They call today the Sunday of Jesus Christ the Servant Leader. In their most recent newspaper, Murphy Davis, a founder of the community, writes, “Jesus tried so hard to help his followers understand that he came not to dominate but to serve.” Let’s take a moment and look at this new definition.

What kind of a king surrounds himself with women, little children, and twelve disciples who were fishermen and the like?

Jesus chose to associate with all sorts of people, not just those who had power and money. In fact, he tended to be with people who didn’t have power. I think of Mary, Martha, the little children who came to him, as well as his twelve disciples, who were fishermen and the like. What kind of a king surrounds himself with those types of people?

As followers of Jesus, we need to consider whom we surround ourselves with. Is it only people who are like us?

In *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story about a colleague who is head of the department of family medicine at an East Coast medical school. One of his patients, a homeless woman whose possessions fit into two shopping carts, would come to see him once a month. She would bring her carts up the steep hill to his clinic by latching them alternately to the parking meters with a belt. First she would tie one, then wheel the other to the next meter uphill, tie it, go back for the first one, untie it, and wheel it to the meter above the second, until both she and the two carts were at the clinic’s front door. Her speech was sometimes rambling, and her clothing was filthy.

Now, a doctor who didn’t see himself as a servant leader would not put up with this at all. He probably would worry about the cleanliness of his office when this dirty, smelly woman came to her appointments. But it didn’t faze him. He would do what he could to ease her burdens. He probably wouldn’t say this of himself, but I believe he was a servant leader just as Jesus was.

That’s one thing I like about Circle of Mercy. We do try to relate to folks who are different from us. A couple of weeks ago, Jo Hauser, Marvin Schrock, and I joined with people at First Presbyterian Church in Asheville for their Saturday Sanctuary program. Every Saturday afternoon this year from October to March, they are opening a room in their church so homeless folks have a place to get out of the cold when everything else is closed. They play family-oriented movies, offer popcorn, coffee, and other snacks. They provide a place for the homeless folks, or neighbors, as they are called, to rest even if just for an afternoon.

As luck would have it, the Saturday we went was a beautiful one outside, so there were only about eighteen neighbors there. Jo pulled out a dominoes game and played with one of the men. It turns out that he was quite a dominoes player, and he taught Jo many tricks of the trade. If you ever play dominoes with Jo, she just might clean your clock. Marvin and I talked with a couple of the men who wanted to talk. We, along with folks at First Presbyterian, were servant leaders that day.

Sometimes I get a little discouraged because I’m not teaching at a college or working as a doctor or nurse. I haven’t published any books or preached great sermons. I’m not the director of anything, and I don’t stand out. When I get into this frame of mind, I try to think of those I know who don’t stand out either, yet their reign is here on this earth.

I think of men like Anthony Davenport. Anthony was dubbed the “minister of transportation” at First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta by the associate pastor there. For fourteen years, Mr. Davenport drove the church’s older members to the grocery store and its children to camp. But his ministry didn’t stop there. When he wasn’t driving for the church, he was driving residents of retirement communities on Peachtree Street to the various places they needed to go.

One retirement community stopped providing bus service, so Mr. Davenport began picking up residents every Friday so that they could go to the grocery store. One of the women said, “I’m on a walker, and he would practically pick me up and put me on the bus, and the same thing getting off.” He was six feet, five inches tall, and he did actually pick folks up to help them get on the bus. Mr. Davenport is a servant leader.

Now, I’m telling you quaint, wonderful little stories about being a servant leader, but you all know that Jesus was crucified for being such a leader. When we choose to truly follow Christ – and I don’t mean all the people who go to church to hear nice sermons on Sunday morning and then eat a good lunch afterwards, or those who serve on all the committees because it’s the right thing to do – but rather those who choose to follow the crucified Christ; when we follow this Christ, we will face hardships. And this is why we need each other here in the Circle.

I think of Ed Weir and his late wife, Mary Ruth Weir, of New Hope House in Jackson, Georgia. They have provided hospitality to those visiting folks on death row in the nearby prison. I knew of Ed and Mary Ruth because of their connection to the Open Door Community.

I didn't really get to know them until I began visiting Terry Mincy on death row in 1997. I remember being a bit nervous the first time I met Terry. What would we talk about? Perhaps we would just sit there staring at each other. I had never visited anyone in prison before, let alone someone on death row. I began by going on one of the trips the Open Door Community makes each month.

When visiting someone in Jackson, as Joyce Hollyday and the Sigmon-Siler family know, you must go through a metal detector, walk down a long hallway, go through another metal detector, give your keys to a guard, and then go to a waiting room until the inmate you're visiting is called. Then you must go through two locked doors into a room where you can visit.

There are four visiting rooms, with a guard who can see into all the rooms. The two women I came with were in the same room as me, and they didn't seem concerned at all to be locked up with condemned killers. So I thought, "I can do this!" But I did look at the window to make sure the guard was watching.

I hoped no one knew what I felt inside. I had been volunteering at the Open Door for a while, and I used to be a minister at a church in Atlanta, so I acted like I didn't have a care in the world. I look back on it now and I chuckle at those first few visits. I'm glad I pushed through my fears.

It didn't take me very long to discover that Terry and I would have plenty to talk about. He was interested in everything. He had a quick mind, and he spoke a mile a minute. He told me about a Scrabble board that he had made, so he and his friend could play the game together. One of his prized possessions was a huge dictionary, which he kept in his cell. He would flip through its pages and learn new words – and this was a man who didn't graduate from high school.

During those first few months when I visited him, I thought we needed to talk about God. What I began to realize, slowly but surely, was that Terry needed to share some of his own experiences, and he wanted to hear about my life. He was trapped in his little cell, and he wanted to hear about the outside world.

By the time I began visiting him, Terry had been on death row for eighteen years. I visited him first with members of the Open Door Community, then with Joyce, and finally with a friend who had metal in his leg from a knee surgery. He always set the metal detectors off, so the guards strip-searched him every time. But he visited at least once every month.

Four years passed, and by then all of Terry's appeals were turned down. He was given an execution date, and because his was the first execution by lethal injection, Terry's murder received quite a lot of attention. As there always is before an execution, there was a vigil outside the prison. Two areas were roped off – one for supporters of the execution, and one for those in opposition. I arrived fairly early, and I saw quite a few cameras.

On that night, the supporters of Terry formed our circle, and a few of us who knew him talked about him. Then we each took a candle and lit it. The flashes of cameras kept blinding me, and I was getting a bit frustrated. There was one more flash in my direction, and I lost my temper. "Don't take my picture!" I yelled, and then fell crying into my husband Michaels's arms. Following my outburst, a group of people stood in front of me to block the cameras. My community.

A few weeks after Terry's murder, we had a gathering for all of his friends. We told stories again, and I finally got to meet all the folks that he had talked about when we visited. I look back on it now, and I realize that we were all servant leaders. Visiting someone in prison is difficult. We needed to support each other.

So on this, the last Sunday of the church year, take a moment and ask yourself, how did I follow Christ, who redefined what it means to be a king? How did I draw on the Circle for support on my journey? How did I support others on their journey to follow the servant leader?

Think of that startling, unforgettable picture of Jesus. He's broken and bloody from his beatings, pushed out in front of the crowd by Pilate who says, "Here is your king!" Let's all be servant leaders like Jesus.

Amen.