

“To Be a Kingdom”

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November 22, 2015 Christ the King Sunday, Year B

John 18:33-37

Revelation 1:4-8

Today we have all kinds of people debating and vying for our attention, confidence and votes in order to become President of the United States. But whether we believe a candidate is an idiot or a potential savior, it's never all good or all bad. A president can make a difference, for better or for worse. But no one can fulfill all their promises, because no one can control all the forces that will impact their leadership. We try to choose wisely. But we have to remember that all politicians are flawed human beings who will make mistakes, fall short and be limited by their circumstances. It takes more than one politician to run our country.

Thousands of years ago, the Hebrew people considered themselves to be a theocracy, that is, a nation ruled by God and God alone. God was in charge. But the people wanted to be like the other nations, and have a king who would go out before them and fight their battles (2 Sam. 8:22). God warned them that having a king would not be good. The king would tax them and take their children to serve in the military. Still, God allowed them to have a king, with this warning: the king should not have too many horses, too many wives, or too much silver or gold. He should have a copy of God's law written for him, and he should read it every day, so he would learn and remember to fear God and keep God's ways. And lastly, he was not to exalt himself above other members of the community. He should know that before God he was a human being just like everyone else (Deut. 17:14 -20). A good warning that we should all take to heart.

So Israel had kings: first Saul, then David, then Solomon, and many, many more. The kings taxed the people and led them in battle. And they also collected many horses and wives, lots of silver and gold, and they forgot to listen to the Lord. It's hard to resist the seduction of power. According to the Bible, that's why Israel was eventually conquered and sent into exile, because the kings and other leaders did not follow God's ways. In exile the people prayed for a mighty king like David to save them. But it never happened. After many years they returned to their own land, but they were still under the rule of occupying nations.

When Jesus began his ministry, the people of Israel were ruled by the Romans. The Romans dominated and terrorized them, taxing them heavily and whenever there was any unrest or threat of rebellion, they would crucify hundreds of people at a time, to intimidate them into submission. The Jewish people looked for someone to save them, a leader to battle against the Romans and win their liberty.

There were times when the crowd was impressed with Jesus, his miracles and when he fed 5,000 people in the wilderness, and they tried to take him by force and make him king. But it says Jesus withdrew to a mountain by himself (John 6:14-15). Again, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the people shouted, "Hosanna! (which means "save us!") Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!" But after the parade Jesus said a few words to the crowd, and then left and hid from them (12:13, 36).

Jesus had the people's attention and a large following. But he rejected that kind of leadership. He was a great teacher and healer. But he also insisted on washing his disciples' feet, something a slave would normally do. He never thought of himself as a king. He called himself the "Son

of Man,” emphasizing his shared humanity. He didn’t want to be set apart from the people. He wanted to give power to the people to do the same kinds of things he did.

So it’s strange that we celebrate “Christ the King Sunday,” when Jesus never called himself “king” or “lord” in the gospels. But those who came after him did, notably the apostle Paul, who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. Still, when Paul called Jesus “King” or “Lord,” it was as much a statement against Roman power as it was about Jesus.

Back then the Romans called their Emperor the “son of god,” and it was believed that when the Emperor died, he would be resurrected and ascend to heaven to reign with god over the universe. In Paul’s world, Caesar was the king or Lord. So when Paul gave that same title to Jesus, he was taking the title away from Caesar. It’s Jesus who is Lord and King, the one who was killed by the Romans, who was resurrected and ascended to reign in heaven with God, not Caesar.

We get a similar message in the book of Revelation that Anne read from this morning. Revelation was also written during a time of great persecution, when Christians were being forced to bow down to the Emperor and worship him, or face death. And so Revelation portrays Jesus as more powerful than any earthly power, and more worthy of our worship. And it begins by saying, “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come... the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”

And so today, when we raise Jesus’ power above the powers of the world, we put all kingdoms and rulers of this world in their proper place, and give people hope and courage in the face of persecution and hardship. But in doing this we have to be careful not to make Jesus into a tyrant. Jesus was not interested in his own popularity or power. He wanted us to be all that we can be in God’s kingdom. As it says in Revelation, “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and *made us to be a kingdom.*” We are the kingdom, not based on the power of Rome or any of the rulers of the world. We are the kingdom based on God’s love for us and our willingness to receive and live it.

Susan read from John this morning, when Jesus came before Pilate he said, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Jesus did confront the evil, violence and oppression of Rome, but not with weapons. He confronted it with silence, with truth, with goodness and love. If we follow Jesus, we too must live in humble service and love.

Most of you know by now that last week I announced I will retire as pastor of this church in January. It was hard for me to get the words out, because I love this church and all of you in it. Since then I have been deeply moved by beautiful letters and emails you have been sending, telling me how much I mean to you and to the church. I know there are negative things you could say as well. Not everyone loves my preaching style, and I’ve annoyed and angered my share of people here over the last 15 years. But it’s good to hear what has made a positive impression. And I appreciate that you are taking the time to write.

One person told me how much it meant to her that I never made her feel judged or ashamed. She had been given some bad labels as a teenager, and I helped her realize they were not true. Someone else marveled that I didn’t seem to have any favorites, but was attentive to everyone and valued them all. Someone reminded me of how I went to her house and helped pick bugs out of her children’s hair when they were afflicted with lice. I had gone through the same thing with my own children, so I knew how horrible it can be. And someone else told me

he was surprised when I cleaned up the coffee cart after worship, as though the pastor should never do something menial like that.

I'm glad that those are among the things you remember about me, because those are the kinds of things everyone can do. You don't need a Divinity School education to clean up the coffee cart. It takes very little skill to pick bugs out of a child's hair. And we are all called as Christians and members of God's kingdom to welcome others without judgement or shame, and to help people see themselves and others with God's eyes, as beloved children. And this is something you can all do. In fact, I see many of you doing similar things all the time. You are the kingdom.

A year or two ago one of the pastors in our Presbytery retired. And as is often the custom, some of the church officers and members came to the Presbytery meeting to show their support. This pastor had been there at least 30 years, and a few of his church members spoke about what a nice guy he was and how he had baptized their children, performed wedding ceremonies, and now had been baptizing their grandchildren. It was all very nice, but I hope that you don't do that for me. I love baptizing you and your children. It's one of my favorite things to do. And I'm so happy that I get to baptize Ryan and Layla Aoki this coming Christmas Day. And I love performing weddings. It brings much joy to me. But what I really want to know is whether I helped you understand what Jesus is about. And I want to know how we have lived God's Kingdom together.

God's kingdom is not dependent on one person. You can respect a pastor as a preacher or teacher. But we are all called to pay attention to and value each and every person, to follow Jesus, and serve God using our gifts, skills and power in humble service. We are all the kingdom.

And so I encourage you to be the kingdom, and follow the ancient warning of God in Deuteronomy. Don't collect too many horses, or cars or airplanes. Don't take too many wives, or husbands, but do your best to work things out with one. Don't accumulate too much silver and gold. We all need some money, but don't keep more than your share. Keep a copy of the Bible around and stay engaged with it. Keep learning and let it guide you in God's ways. And most important, don't exalt anyone above other members of the community. We are all human beings. The greatest is a servant like Jesus. We are all to be servants. And all of us together are the kingdom of God, with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone our Lord and King. Amen.