

Christ the King A. Matthew 25:31-46. November 26, 2017.

I would like to begin with a short course in church nerdery. My most popular sermons tend to focus heavily on the liturgical calendar, and I sense that we could all use a hit. Seriously though, bear with me for a moment because I think that it is important. The church keeps its own calendar, with liturgical seasons and holidays and, terribly confusingly, its own new year, which is next Sunday. The church year turns over on the first Sunday of Advent, which is next week, and we will change colors and switch our focus from the gospel of Matthew to the gospel of Mark. The whole thing is on a three year cycle with the colorful names of years a, b, and c, so the same readings come around every three years.

So today is the last day of the liturgical year and it is a feast called Christ the King. It is one of my favorite Sundays because no matter what year it is, the readings radically reshape whatever we think it ought to mean to have Jesus as a king. And by doing so, it calls us to reshape all of our political loyalties because our first loyalty goes to a very odd king indeed.

This year, we have this wonderful and really pretty straightforward parable that informs us that those who will inherit the kingdom of God are those who have cared for the poor, the hungry, the ill, the imprisoned, because when they did so they were actually caring for Christ himself. It reshapes what we mean when we think of a king because Jesus is both the guy up on the throne judging the nations and, just as much, the hungry, thirsty, ill, imprisoned, naked stranger. He is not a king who wanders around disguised as a beggar, like in the fairytales. He is truly present among the people we are trained not to see, within and among them, and so as we interact or ignore them, we truly treat Jesus in the same way. This is a king who can only be served by caring for the guy on the green line who wants change for the bus, the guy doing his third hitch in the penitentiary, the woman who is fading away from cancer, and reminding us just a little too much of our own mortality and needs. He is an unusual king, who nevertheless claims our absolute allegiance, whether we know we are giving it or not.

I did all that church nerdery at the beginning of this sermon because I preached on this same text three years ago on this day, and at that time I more or less said, “Yeah, look, what Jesus said. Loyalty to Jesus must be expressed by caring for those in need and today just reminds us to be loyal to Jesus.” And I more or less think the same thing today. But this raises a serious question for us. We who have dragged ourselves out of a holiday slumber to stagger down to church all ragged and hopeful and slightly out of it. We who are about to embark on four weeks that will call us back into this building multiple times a week as we try to suck all the juice out of Advent. If all Jesus really cares about is what we do out there, then why on earth is it so important that we come together here?

It’s a good question and when the church stops asking it, the church has probably started to die. I think a good answer can be found by going back to the notions of king Jesus and the kingdom of God. I mentioned that this is a very bizarre king, and I think we can extend that to say that the kingdom of God is a very bizarre place. Just think of how well we are trained not to notice the very people that Jesus here calls members of his family. Just think of the shopping that has dominated the last two days: the sacrament of a culture that believes that making and spending money is the highest good. I’m not

trying to emphasize the wickedness of these aspects of our life; I'm trying to emphasize their normality.

It is we who are weird, with our admittedly beleaguered and inconsistent insistence that all people bear the stamp of the image of God and that the only redemption that matters is given, not purchased. Whether we are doing well in this culture or not, to the extent that we are Christians we are resident aliens in it. Because our true citizenship is in the kingdom of God, ruled and judged by that man who identifies himself completely both with God and those huddled in the corners of our culture. We didn't earn our way into this citizenship. We were somehow chosen. We aren't the only ones who were chosen and we're not more chosen than other people. We're just somehow chosen—maybe we're among the many who have some glimmer of awareness that we and everybody else have been chosen.

But the odds are stacked against us. Not because of persecution or something, but because we're just normal folks with mortgages and bad knees and annoyances at work and too little time. Because we fit in here. These accidental saints from the parable are much holier than I am. They can't believe that when they just took care of someone in need, they were caring for Jesus. I know that the guy on the green line is Jesus, and I still would vastly prefer that he not interrupt my reading. I am still learning how to be a citizen in this bonkers kingdom of God and the only way that I can learn it is by seminar, not just individual study.

This is why we come here in such need and hope even though we know that the action is "out there:" because this is the place where we are learning to be citizens in God's kingdom. We are teaching each other how to see and serve Jesus in the world out there. We are practicing being disciples. When we gather blankets to distribute to the naked; when we open our doors and roll out pads and wheel in food for the stranger; when we send one of our number to take communion to a sick parishioner; when we kneel together to receive food that we have provided and God has blessed through our common prayer, we are learning how to see and respond to Jesus wherever we encounter him. And we must take care not to think that this is the main place where those encounters happen. This is our school for discipleship. It is a privilege to be learning with you. Amen.