

Sermon 26 November 2017

***Reign of Christ***

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

This is the last Sunday of our Christian year. Advent begins next Sunday, and, once again, we prepare to welcome Christ. The great cycle of the spiritual seasons begins again—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time. Today, the last Sunday of the Christian year, is designated the *Reign of Christ* or *Christ the King*. It is a Sunday we recognize the humble supremacy of Christ and reaffirm our commitment to follow where he leads us. It is a day we rededicate ourselves to live the Jesus Way. As one of my priest friends says every day in every circumstance—*Live Jesus*.

It is a day we pray with Paul.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened  
in order that you may know  
the hope to which he has called you,  
the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,  
and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the glorious Father, may give you  
the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,  
so that you may know him better.

How do we live if Paul's prayer is answered—if the *eyes of our hearts are enlightened*—if *we know him better*?

Matthew uses the ancient image of the sheep and the goats to distinguish two ways of living—two very *practical*, down-to-earth ways of living in world. If the *eyes of our hearts are enlightened* we see the needs of others and we respond. If we *know* Jesus, we become *like* him. If we *know* Jesus we will *meet* him in our service to the *least* of his (and our) brothers and sisters. If we know Jesus we will live with practical love.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,  
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,

I was a stranger and you invited me in,  
I needed clothes and you clothed me,  
I was sick and you looked after me,  
I was in prison and you came to visit me.

One of the fundamental questions the faithful of all religions have asked through the centuries is “*Who are my brothers and my sisters?*” You would think the parable of the Good Samaritan would have answered that question for every Christian, but tragically the church has continued to try to distinguish who is part of the family of God and who is not. Too often we welcome a few and exclude many. Every week there are news stories of people who draw thick lines between those who are *in* and those who are outside the family.

The massacre at a Sufi mosque in the Egyptian Sinai is one of the latest assaults on God’s children by a group who believes they have exclusive claims to God’s approval. Over 300 people were killed at worship, including almost 30 children. Sufi’s are the mystics of Islam—prayerful, radically peaceful people who seek to live in God’s presence. Instead of marauding through villages, leaving carnage in their wake, Sufi’s bring peace—food for the hungry, alms for the needy, clothes for the tattered poor.

The victims in the Sinai are our brothers and sisters. I am convinced they are among the sheep of the gospel story. Compare them to the self-righteous, exclusive religious of Islam *and* Christianity—those who believe the family is composed of a few brothers and sisters who have fulfilled their arbitrary requirements for inclusion.

It is hard to find a more graphic description of the self-identified “chosen few” than the words from Ezekiel.

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture?

Must you also trample the rest of your pasture  
with your feet?

Is it not enough for you to drink clear water?

Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?

Must my flock feed on what you have trampled

and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

It is one thing to enjoy the blessings of our faith; it is quite another to try to shut out others because they do not conform to our teachings and rituals. It is one thing to share our faith with hope and love; it is quite another to judge and condemn others outright without knowing the state of their soul or the quality of their heart. It is not our role to judge—judgment belongs to God. It *is* our role to share the love we have received with humility and grace—in plain and often simple acts of kindness. We believe what we share is backed up and empowered by God—by the power that raised Christ from the dead. That should be enough for us.

Embraced and empowered by God's love we should expect to meet Christ in everyone we encounter. Should we expect everyone we meet to be a child of God—even though some of them may be heavily disguised? Should we begin every day expecting to meet Christ? Should we walk into the day armed with respect, ready to treat everyone as sacred? Might everyone we meet offer us God's presence in Christ? Surely that would be a wonderful way to live our lives. What a difference we would make—go out without fear, go out with hope and wondering expectation

A few weeks ago I was asked to bring a devotional to a meeting with other pastors in the Valley. We are joined in our shared faith in Christ and we hold many essentials in common—but we have many differences of opinion about the details of what it means to be Christian and what it means to be faithful. As I thought about what I would say to the group, I considered trying to straighten them out about some of the wrong things they believe. It took me several days to put that attitude aside. Finally, I decided to offer something you and I have shared many times—something we believe to be at the heart of our faith. Here's what I shared.

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It's been 30 years since I was stationed in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. (I've reached that age of incredulity about how much time has

passed.) One evening I was teaching a Bible study to a group of expatriates. Members of the group were from several countries—Pakistan, India, Switzerland, England, Ireland, Nepal, Iran and Bahrain. We fellowshiped together, but when the teaching began they broke into smaller groups according to their home language. There was a translator in each of the non-English speaking groups.

In the middle of the study I asked a question. “What is the hardest teaching of your Christian faith to believe?” It may have been because we were in a Muslim country, but the number one response was “*The Trinity*.” Some mentioned the *incarnation*, others the *resurrection*, some the *second coming*, but by far the majority said the *trinity*. We talked about that for a while—and we came back to the question several times in the following months.

Let me ask you that question today. Please don’t answer now—we can talk about it later if you’d like, but just think about it now.

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Several years later I was preaching at a church in Corpus Christi and I asked the same question. In the sermon I shared what I believe is the truest answer to that question—not for everyone perhaps, not in every season of our lives perhaps, but for most of us most of the time.

I believe the hardest thing for people to believe, even we Christians, is that *God really loves us*.

We can argue about teachings, haggle over the meaning of parables, judge heresies. We can live our faith in our minds, debate our differences with other Christians and with believers in other religions—but love is of the heart, and how well and true we love determines everything we do.

We can talk about tough love (and we should), but too often the history of the church has been characterized by stories of loveless righteousness—rules and regulations that build walls instead of open doors. Without love we only join the ancient cruel circle dance of one tribe against all others.

In one of his most beautifully inspired writings, Paul could not have been more eloquent—or more adamant.

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,  
but do not have love,  
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.  
And if I have prophetic powers,  
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,  
but do not have love,  
I **am** nothing.  
If I give away all my possessions,  
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,  
but do not have love,  
I **gain** nothing.  
(1 Corinthians 13:1-3)*

It is one of the things I say to those who come to worship in our church:

*Once you know God loves you, once you embrace the love of Christ—all the rest is commentary.*

What is the greatest commandment?  
*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*  
*This is the greatest and first commandment.*  
*And the second is like it:*  
*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*  
***On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*** (Matthew 22:37-39)

All the rest is commentary.

To make sure his disciples knew how they were to love their neighbors, Jesus said it plainly:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.*

***Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.***

*By this everyone will know that that you are my disciples,  
if you have love for one another.*

(John 13:34-35)

It all begins with God's love.

*In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us  
and sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

(1 John 4:10)

And so I come full circle. The hardest thing for us to believe is that God really loves us—when we feel strong and confident, and when we are weak and unsure—when we are kind and when we are cruel—when we go the extra mile and when we turn away indifferent. God loves us.

Get that—*really get it*—and all the rest is commentary.

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Around the table were a Baptist, an Assembly of God Pentecostal, a Presbyterian, and a Four Square Gospel preacher. I invited my friends to share their thoughts about what was the hardest thing for us to believe as Christians. One said, "I thought of the teaching that we are *justified by faith*." She paused, "*Which is another way of saying God really loves us.*" Another said, "*A few years ago, I was talking with my mother and I told her that sometimes I had a hard time believing God is good.*" He paused, "*Which is another way of saying God really loves us.*"

We prayed a simple prayer together. *Help us know better and share better the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* I believe it is love that moves the hearts of my brothers and sisters everywhere—those who believe as I do and those who believe differently. It is love that urges us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give clean water to the thirsty, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner—those imprisoned in

our jails and those imprisoned in addiction and anger, loneliness and hopelessness.

It is love I feel for my Sufi brothers and sisters in the Egyptian Sinai as they grieve. It is love we have for one another in our church family—and it is love we have for the wandering souls we meet on the crooked roads we travel together. It is the love of God we have as we choose to live in the realm where Christ is king.