



“Citizens of Christ’s Kingdom”
Scripture – Matthew 25:31-46
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, November 26, 2017

My objective was to retrieve a carrot.

I was a visitor to a foreign land, where carrots were the prized possession. As I passed through the door into this strange world, I was stunned by the stillness. Everything was calm. And ordered. And eerily silent.

All around me, the citizens of this kingdom carried out their duties with abject obedience: Across the lawn, women were stationed with broomsticks and mops — silently but sternly keeping an austere peace. In between their posts, the male subjects crawled, ant-like, on all fours — carrots clamped between their teeth. They were systematically making their way toward a makeshift stage, each one on a mission to present these tributes to their Sovereign. And there, in the center of this spectacle, sat the queen — on her Dais — guards flanking her on either side, and a pile of carrots at her feet.

Obviously, this is not a real Kingdom. I’m sure you have all figured that out by now. It was an imaginary world — the setting for a game my church youth group played during a mission trip to the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington state. This was an exercise in cross-cultural sensitivity designed to teach us how to enter into another society without offending our hosts. As an ambassador sent from one imaginary world to another, my job was to observe the customs of this kingdom, to navigate this foreign landscape respectfully, and — ultimately — to come away with a souvenir from my travels: a coveted carrot from the feet of their queen. (To those of you who will ask me later: yes, I did manage to retrieve one.)

So why am I talking about an imaginary kingdom that I briefly inhabited fifteen years ago?

Well ... This game taught more than the art of assimilation. It was something of a sociological study, an exercise in moving through communities different than my own with a degree of humility and curiosity. Ten minutes in this foreign land taught me the simple truth that kingdoms reflect their kings ... or, in this case, queens. The other group had imagined a world built around a queen who valued hierarchy and obedience and tranquility (and, of course, carrots). And this was clear in her subjects’ stoicism, and their rigid adherence to the laws of the land.

We can see this reality in the worldly kingdoms highlighted in our history books, mirrored in the fantasy kingdoms of our story books, and even in the narratives of our sacred text. Across time and genre, kingdoms take the shape of their kings.

Today we turn our attention to another king. A different king. On this, the last Sunday in the Christian year, we celebrate *Christ* the King and acknowledge him Lord of all. We proclaim that this crucified and risen One reigns o'er heaven and earth, and over every aspect of our lives.

Yes — it's a claim that seems strange to many of us. After all, we are people who cling to the ideals of democracy, and fiercely resist threats to our personal freedoms and independence. It's uncomfortable to think ourselves subject to anything ... or anyone.

Yet, we mortals also find hope in the truth that Christ — and Christ alone — reigns supreme. For it means that suffering, that evil, that death do not. Today we celebrate that the one who has triumphed o'er the grave reigns already and will come in glory to make all things right.

This is the image that Matthew sets before us today in the final parable of his Gospel. At the end of time, Christ the King sits upon his throne in glory, with all the nations of the earth gathered before him. It's a familiar text — one we return to time and again to remind ourselves of Christ's charge to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to care for the sick. Yet, we often overlook the detail that this scene unfolds within the heavenly throne room, as Christ the Judge separates the sheep from the goats — the righteous flock blessed to inherit the kingdom, and the accursed goats sent away to be punished. A grim scene indeed, if one counts themselves a goat.

And the criteria that guides his hand? As Christ sits upon the throne — the heavenly host at his head, the earthly nations at his feet — the Exalted One identifies with the lowly — the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned. "Truly I tell you," he says, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

It should not surprise us that the King of kings chooses to cast off power and glory and enter fully into the suffering of this world. For we know this Christ.

This is the one who came among us as a tiny babe, borne of an unwed mother from the Podunk town of Nazareth ... whose first bed was a manger, and first audience — a rabble of humble shepherds. Who surrounded himself with people desperate for healing, who had compassion on hungering crowds. This is the one who chose a lowly donkey over a noble steed for his entry into Jerusalem, and whose earthly life ended in humiliation and suffering as he hung upon a Roman cross.

It is this Jesus who now sits upon the throne in glory — the very one we laud today as King of kings and Lord of lords.

So as we hear Matthew's telling of this parable, as we lift our gaze to the splendor of the exalted Christ, *Christ* turns his attention to those he has always sought out: the forgotten, the desperate, the lonely, the despised. It should not surprise us that Christ's heart aches for "the least of these," even in this scene of final glory ... And, yet, it is a royal image so unlike those of the earthly kings who figure prominently in our history books, and story books, and in the pages of our Sacred texts that it strikes us as radical.

Christ is a king who dwells in the company of angels, but who claims the lowly as his family; a king who reigns in power by setting aside power; a king who is exalted above the nations, but who chooses no other glory than service.

And this, my friends, is the One whom we profess as Lord of our lives. As Christians we place our trust in this Christ, and pledge our faithfulness to him. This can be no half-hearted allegiance, no compromised claim — something we would do well to remember in a culture more comfortable with a gospel of prosperity than a gospel that compels a faithful response. To acknowledge Christ as Lord calls us to submit every aspect of our lives to the commands of Christ's compassionate reign — the way we spend our time and our money; what we choose to value and how much; what, and whom, we ignore. To acknowledge Christ as Lord means we intentionally inhabit his kingdom — that we live as citizens of a realm of justice and peace.

This may sound impossible. How on earth do we inhabit a kingdom that seems nothing more than a far-away vision, an imaginary world? Especially when random violence escalates our fears of each other, and of “the other.” When each day’s headline reveals more human need, as catastrophe and war compound suffering ... We are exhausted. How do we cross the threshold into the realm of Christ, when we can hardly find the will or heart to knock at its door?

We need look no further for strength and encouragement than to the one who sits upon the throne, inviting us to inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for us since the foundation of the world. If we look to Christ, we will discover the key to inhabiting this world. For, as we know, kingdoms take the shape of their kings. And the Kingdom of God is no different.

As we see in our text from Matthew, the one who sits upon the throne points us toward those in need of care: “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.” These words are a call that have echoed through the ages, giving direction and purpose to those who profess Christ as Lord. And, as subjects of this king, we still strive to live as citizens of his kingdom by heeding this call to service.

Our allegiance to Christ leads members of this congregation to serve breakfast to hundreds of our neighbors every Saturday morning. With simple gifts of pancakes and sausage and coffee, these disciples share Christ's abundance and love, and those who suffer the pangs of hunger find their hunger satisfied, and – hopefully – their spirits nourished.

Others among us give gloves to warm naked hands on cold winter nights, or sort sweaters and jeans at the Friendship House Clothing Bank, so that families throughout Wilmington have access to the clothes they so desperately need.

As a community, we strive to practice hospitality by welcoming the stranger. Many of you have helped host families who are experiencing homelessness by transforming classrooms into bedrooms, preparing a meal for our guests, or playing with the children who are staying the night to help them feel at home in this unfamiliar space.

And, through our partnerships with Christians around the world, we care for the most vulnerable by supporting clinics in Congo and Guatemala. These ministries ensure that our sisters and brothers in struggling communities receive care, which would otherwise be reserved for the wealthy.

With the Spirit’s help, our allegiance to Christ leads us to ministries of compassion, small and large, through the church and beyond. And, as we serve those who live through challenges and crises, as we care for those who suffer, we hear the echo of our King’s voice: “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 ...”

Through these acts of service, we begin to live as citizens of Christ’s realm of justice and peace. And, with each meal shared, each malady healed, we realize we *are* inhabiting the Kingdom of God, right here in our midst. This world that seemed so out of reach suddenly becomes anything but imaginary — something we can behold in the face of the stranger, and feel in the warm embrace of someone who has felt forgotten. It’s a kingdom I have experienced myself, as I’ve sat at table with sisters who are hungry for food, shared fellowship with those who were once strangers, or prayed with brothers whose bodies or spirits ache with illness. I imagine many of you have experienced this too. When we heed Christ’s call to care for “the least of these,” and live in faithfulness to the King of kings, we often find that all life becomes more abundant. And in small ways, in unexpected places — this world begins to look more and more like the kingdom that has been prepared for us since the foundation of the world — the kingdom that Christ our King invites us to inhabit.

May it be so.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

On most Sundays, the Prayers of the People are offered by a pastor on behalf of our congregation. Most of today's prayer is literally the prayers of the people because it is comprised of the blessings you wrote last Sunday on the "Give Thanks" cards. The four things you most frequently mentioned were family, friends, health, and our church. There were far too many items to name them all, but we will find other ways to share more of them with you. Let us pray:

Energy of the universe and Composer of creation, we pause to give you thanks. Much of the time we move through our days without taking time to reflect on the abundant blessings of our lives. We become accustomed to the gifts that flow our way and simply take them without recognizing the source of all gifts. But right here, right now, in this moment, we slow our breathing...we calm our minds...and we express the meditations of our hearts.

Gracious God, thank you for my family who centers me, my friends who encourage me, my church that embraces me, and your love that guides me. We give thanks for great health, rewarding work, faith, stamina, a decent job, a nice place to live, the opportunity to be together during the holidays, for a great but struggling country, the willingness of others to engage in peaceful conflict resolution, modern medicine, this generous congregation as reflected by our capital campaign, your enduring love, and the hope of the New Testament.

Everlasting God, we express our gratitude for Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit, a home, transportation, the freedom to live in a free country, access to health care, my loving, giving, and patient husband, my children with the diverse talents you have given them, the love and support of my wife, this inclusive and spirit-filled church, the Flying Solos, opportunities for Christian service, a loving choir family, fabulous music, our church leaders, the support of Westminster as our family goes through a very difficult time, for education, toys, and for Sudie's and Merideth's soon-to-be born babies.

Life giving Spirit, we are grateful for the beauty in this world and the need to preserve it, for access to clean water and sanitation, for healthy food, for birds, trees, flowers, pets, animals, my beloved husband who is with Jesus, having all my needs met, for meaningful work to do in helping bring about joy and justice for others, for the opportunity to begin legacies with young folks, and for the promise of eternal life with God.

Loving God, when we pause to focus on the things for which we give you thanks, we become aware that there is an endless list of blessings. May we set aside time each day to express our thanks knowing that a grateful heart generates peace, love, and joy in our soul. Now, hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray together: "Our Father...