

Christ the King
A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Fort Collins, Colorado
November 20, 2011

Jesus invites us,
in this life,
in this broken, beautiful world,
to experience the life of heaven now.
He insisted over and over that God's peace, joy, and love
are currently available to us, exactly as we are.

Life has never been about just "getting into heaven". It's about thriving in
God's good world. It's stillness, peace, and that feeling of your soul being at
rest, while at the same time it's about asking things, learning things, creating
things, and sharing it all with others who are finding the same kind of joy in
the same good world.

Jesus calls disciples to keep entering into this shared life of peace and joy as
it transforms our hearts, until it's the most natural way to live that we can
imagine. Until it's second nature. Until we naturally embody and practice the
kind of attitudes and actions that will go on in the age to come.

—Rob Bell, *Love Wins*

Texts: Ephesians 1:15-23 & Matthew 25:31-46

On the church's calendar, today is Christ the King Sunday. Liturgically, this is the
last Sunday of the church's year. Next Sunday, we start a new calendar. Next Sunday,
we begin the season of Advent. This Sunday, we end the church's year with a reminder
that the story we've been living is not over, that the day is coming when Jesus will be
revealed as Lord of the Universe. King. Ruler. Sovereign. This morning's reminder is
delivered in the form of a parable that Jesus tells about the day when the Son of Man
will come and sit as king upon the throne of his glory to judge the nations.

[Read Matthew 25:31-46.]

There's hardly a soul, outside of the church as well as within, that hasn't heard
the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. It's one of the most powerful, memorable and
oft-quoted of Jesus' parables. When folks hear this story, they picture it in their mind's
eye and, once they picture it, it is forever registered: a chilling revelation, one group

heading off into a kingdom of untold wonder, the other heading off to hell. I want to say something about this picture. I'll end by saying something about this picture.

But I want to begin by saying something about Jesus. Because this is Christ the King Sunday. This is the Sunday when we're reminded – in the texts that have come down to us – that in spite of the evidence; in spite of our troubling doubt at times – there will come a time when, as the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Christians in Philippi, “every knee shall bend and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:10-11).” I want to begin by saying something about Jesus because most often, when we turn to this text, we preachers are apt to talk about the “least of these”, about the sheep, about the goats. We use the parable to call the church to care for those on edge in life – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned; to remind the church that, according to this parable, our care for the needy will be the basis of our judgment. This isn't a misuse of the text. But there's something more going on in Jesus' parable.

As Charles Cousar, a New Testament professor, points out, the spotlight of this parable isn't focused as much on the judgment as it is on the Judge.¹ Read in the context of Christ the King Sunday, we're invited to think, first of all, not about what we're supposed to do as followers of Jesus, but to think first of all about what Jesus has done. The chief protagonist in this parable is neither the group on the king's right nor the group on the king's left nor “the least of these.” The major player in Jesus' parable is the one who will appear to judge the nations, who like a shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats. The real surprise in this parable is not that some will be surprised to learn that they were faithful or unfaithful. The real surprise is this: the humble shepherd who lived among us in the first century tending to his flock as it were – seeing to their sustenance, their safety, their healing, even dying for the sake of his flock – will turn out to be the Lord of the Universe.

As Matthew reaches the end of his Gospel account of Jesus' life and ministry – the very next verses reveal the plot to arrest and kill Jesus and the chapters after this one tell the story of his betrayal and crucifixion – Matthew chooses this parable to remind us, to encourage us with this remarkable claim at the center of our faith. The one who appeared among us healing the sick, feeding the hungry, making room for the stranger, eating with outcasts and sinners – the one the world crucified – will return to rule in peace, with justice and righteousness (Isaiah 9).

Now, for a church that is easily discouraged – like the early church in Matthew's day and the church in ours – this reminder of Jesus' Lordship comes like a refreshing cup of water to the thirsty, like a feast to those who are hungry. For a church that is easily distracted – like the church in Matthew's day and the church in ours – this reminder is a sober wake-up call. Jesus is Lord.

You may remember my saying a couple of weeks ago that, when the church was drifting or asking questions nobody had good answers to, when the church was challenged, even persecuted, again and again the earliest Christians recommitted

themselves not to a doctrine, not to a prescribed set of rituals, or a list of rules and regulations, not first of all. They recommitted themselves to Jesus, to following Jesus, because they believed that Jesus was not only their Lord but Lord of the Universe too. On Christ the King Sunday, when we're about to turn the page to a new year on our calendar and celebrate the birth in Bethlehem, it's good to be reminded that the vulnerable little baby lying in the manger, the curious twelve-year old in the Temple, the rabbi who travelled from village to village and was accused by Israel's leaders of perverting their nation and starting a tax revolt and claiming to be the Messiah (Luke 23:2), will be revealed as the ruler of the universe. He's not just our savior. He's our Sovereign.

I promised to say something about this terrifying scene: folks being herded off into eternal punishment. I hate it when Jesus uses this kind of language in his parables: doors slamming, the sound of the gnashing of teeth, folks being thrown into a consuming fire. What about these people? Are they beyond the reach of the Sovereign's grace? Of course not. They are us. You and me. This is why Jesus is telling this parable, here, now, and not just letting it all unfold as a dreadful surprise at the end.

If there is any surprise that tending to the needs of others around us, that to love or not to love, has eternal consequences, that it's not enough simply to cry, "Lord, Lord", Jesus lets us in on the surprise right now. This is what turns this parable of judgment into a parable of grace (Capon). The judgment is rendered *here, now* – in our either embracing or failing to embrace the life and practices of the king, to live and love like Jesus or not. The key to entering into the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world – into the kingdom's fullness and wonder and joy in the end – is to let the king lead us into its fullness and joy right now.

Some of you will recall my telling you about one of Janet's and my Palestinian friends. His name is Nader Abu Amsha. Nader is director of the East Jerusalem YMCA's Rehabilitation Program just outside of Bethlehem. Nader was asked a few years ago (2005) to travel to Indonesia to meet with leaders of a wide variety of NGOs – non-government organizations including nonprofit groups such as the YMCA and associations such as the Red Cross and the Muslim equivalent, the Red Crescent; government funded programs like U.S. Aid; and faith-based ministries such as World Vision and Habitat for Humanity and those of other faiths. It is well-known on the international scene – and a deep frustration to many – that these NGOs can be very uncooperative. The distrust often has its genesis in competition for who gets the money, who gets the credit, and even in their varying faith perspectives. It was remarkable that leaders of these Indonesian NGOs even agreed to meet. No one had high hopes for the meeting. But they had agreed to gather because they all knew better, because they're working to the same ends and, most importantly, because the increasing violence between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia was hampering their common mission to address enormous development needs and the aftermath of devastating natural disasters.

They asked Nader to travel from Palestine to Indonesia to lead the group in its first meeting because he's had experience in working ecumenically under difficult circumstances. Nader told me that the meeting began tentatively. He was very nervous because although Palestinian Muslims and Christians have significant differences, they're not killing each other. The things that divided these Indonesian leaders were deeply felt having been so tragically experienced. After being introduced, Nader began by asking the group to pair up and introduce themselves. He said, "Tell each other about your life and your family and the work you do and the challenges you face and why you do the work you do. Then, you'll introduce your partner to the entire group." The exercise went well. A spirit of cooperation emerged. The meeting went well. It produced a lot of fruit.

At day's end, a Buddhist leader remembered that Nader had been only briefly introduced at the beginning of the meeting. He asked Nader to say something about himself. Nader told about his wife and his children, his work at the West Bank YMCA. Then Nader said, "I want to tell you about my faith, why I do the work I do. In our sacred book," he said, "we are told that in the very beginning God made us all in the image of God, in God's own image. The Muslims and the Jews here today believe this, too, because it's in their sacred texts – that all men and women are made in the image of God, and that in spite of our differences we are expected to treat each other as bearers of the image of God." Nader went on. "There's another passage in the Christian's sacred book that guides my life and work. Jesus taught his followers that we are expected in life to do two things: to love God with the whole of who we are, and to love others, all others, as we love ourselves. That's it. These are the two texts, the two beliefs that have shaped my life and my work."

There are two words theologians use to get at the heart of the Christian faith, what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Both are important. Orthodoxy. And orthopraxy. Orthodoxy has to do with correct belief, interpreting the Bible correctly, getting our doctrines, our teachings right. Nader was raised as a Greek Orthodox Christian. Later, he later became a Baptist. There aren't too many expressions of Christianity that take orthodoxy more seriously. Orthopraxy has to do with correct practice. Our doing the right thing. I'm all for orthodoxy – our beliefs inform and empower our actions. It's Nader discerning that the heart of Jesus' teaching, the Bible's teachings, the church's faith is to love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But the discerning, the believing part is not enough. In the end – when the nations are gathered before the One who sits on the throne of his glory – how we've practiced our faith will turn out to be more important than how we believed it. When the king comes and sits on his throne – the king of the universe, the sovereign over all the nations – it doesn't appear, according to *this* parable, that the king will be examining our believing. According to this parable, he'll be judging our behaving.

— Jeff Wright

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¹ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A*, p. 576