

Last Pentecost, Christ the King
Christ and Grace
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Luke 23:33-43
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Years ago I visited a retirement community every week, taking communion to the residents there. I made the rounds, knocking on doors, asking if the resident would like a visit or to receive communion. Sometimes people said no thank you, other times they were so grateful to have a visit, and often it all depended on how they were feeling that day. This ministry always brought me great joy – still does.

But there was one man that I visited whom I found challenging. He loved to talk. Actually it was more of a speech, and in his voice it was easy to hear a tone of bitter superiority. He complained about the people around him, both residents and staff, and about all the things he thought needed to change, how he'd do things if he were in charge, and all the things with which he was dissatisfied. He had all the answers, he was sure he was right, and there was no chance of a real conversation. He was not able to entertain any new possibilities or perspectives. I used to think of him as the "man who would be king." I wanted to be compassionate because, after all, he was in a difficult situation and was probably trying to do what he could to feel useful. But he was clearly also wanting to feel important, wanting to be in control, or as my kids used to say, he wanted to be the boss of everybody!

And then, there was another problem. It was uncomfortably easy to recognize myself in this man who annoyed me so much. His self-righteous anger, certainty, and need to control tapped into my own and caught me up short, reminding me that our aspirations to become the king, the boss of everybody, are so tempting!

The memories of this man and my time visiting those folks bubbled up when I read today's Gospel lesson, a lesson that at first seems a strange one to read today, on what we call "Christ the King Sunday." In this story Jesus doesn't appear to be a king at all, but hangs on the cross, and there are two criminals hanging beside Jesus. There was the one, a cynical malcontent, bitter and scornful, mocking Jesus even in his dying. And the other, who recognized Jesus as king, knowing his own sin and hoping for mercy, longing only to be received into the arms of God.

And I think the truth, at least for me, is that both of these two criminals are all of us at one time or another, often only depending on the time of day, or how we're feeling, or what's going on in our personal lives. Sometimes we are able to keep our anger and resentment gracefully concealed. But sometimes our circumstances will trigger and release our bitterness and we find ourselves cursing the driver in front of us or talking back to the TV or just throwing our hands up in despair. And then too, sometimes we are well aware of our own flaws and failings and we only hope that God has more mercy than we do. The truth is, Golgotha happens more than we care to admit.

At the most basic level, we are all in need of saving, in need of being remembered by Jesus; saved from one another and from ourselves, preferably by someone who will fix all that's broken in this world. Hundreds of years later not much has changed. We still want someone who will

solve the problem of crime and economic disparity, who will do something about the homeless and incurable disease. We want someone who will make it all better.

In Jesus' day, the people yearned for someone who would overthrow the harsh Roman rule and return them to the kingdom they remembered, that of the glory of King David and the wisdom of Solomon. And for many, their hopes were kindled in Jesus, a man who cast out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. If he could do all that, perhaps he was their long-awaited king.

But if we really want to know the kind of king we hold dear, and the kingdom we are called to inhabit, we have to return to a Galilean hillside, crowded with hungry, hurting people. Because the reality of God's kingdom is that it is a kingdom made up of the sick and wounded, the misfits, the homeless, and the abandoned. This kingdom is also made up of the self-righteous and the self-certain, the rude and the greedy, the angry and the spiteful, all the qualities we hope we are not and yet, we often are... It is for these, for all of us, that Christ became incarnate. It is for all of us that he died.

A crown is a symbol for a king. When my children were small they loved to go to Burger King, as much for the free paper crown as for the food. All was fine when they came home, all wearing their crowns. Our house had 2 kings and 1 queen. But if someone's crown was torn or lost the peaceful kingdom dissolved into tears and arguments – oh, how much importance we attach to a symbol of power and authority! How misplaced our life's priorities can become.

Perhaps, in hearing the story of Jesus the king on the cross, we may catch a glimpse of how life is supposed to be. Because those two criminals are us, our own divided selves, wrestling for control, for safety, for power, wrestling for a Burger King paper crown when the way of Jesus promises a crown of life. Because the reality is that following Jesus means going where Jesus would go and doing what Jesus would do, even in the face of aggravation and discouragement, even when it seems nothing ever changes. But still going. Because cynicism, negativity, anger and resentment are not cures, they are not helpful, but rather block us from committing to bring about God's kingdom, the reign of Christ.

It turns out that the man in the nursing home was my teacher, the one who taught me patience and compassion, the one whose life became a warning against self-righteousness, and the one who demanded that I see him with the eyes of Jesus. Our faith doesn't demand that we like people like him; but it does demand that we care for them. And it's not easy and sometimes we don't want to. But then we remember our baptismal vows and our Sunday prayers and the confession we always say and, in those and in the Eucharist, Golgotha becomes once more a present reality. And we are still thieves, like those criminals on the crosses beside Jesus, sometimes stealing the joy from others, sometimes crushing our own joy, because this side of heaven, there will always be people and things that need fixing.

Thankfully, Jesus shows us what that should look like. It looks like giving oneself away to people who need it and to people who don't believe it and to people who don't want it. It looks like love when loving is hard and exhausting. It looks like healing for people who thought there was no cure. It looks a lot like an innocent man on a cross, wearing a crown of thorns, from

whom we learn that the cure for self-righteousness is self-giving. We saw it first on the cross, and our job now is to embody it, to be the change we wish to see.

The world is not yet what God dreamed of at creation. We are not yet the people we are called to be. But at the foot of the cross we see what it could be, might be, can be, if only we will set aside our own agenda for the one we testify to every Sunday. Imagine us all walking around with crowns of love on our heads! Amen.

With gratitude for much inspiration for this sermon from The Rev. Patti Davis.