

Looking for the love that still exists

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service November 20, 2011: The Last Sunday after Pentecost—Christ the King.
Based on Matthew 25:31-46.*

In the church year, this Sunday is known as "Christ the King." For many that is a problem. "King," you see, is a charged word. Many churches actually change the liturgical name of this day from Christ the King to the "Reign of Christ." I get the argument. King *is* a loaded word. Critics of those who change cry political correctness and proclaim that all that is good and true about life is now lost forever. The other side makes equally dire claims. Both positions, when strongly argued, grow old quite quickly for me. Of course, political correctness is all that everyone says it is: annoying and tiresome. And, yet, I am old enough to remember when no one thought about such concerns, when no one paid much attention to inclusive language or sensitivity training. For the record, that wasn't so great either—unless you just happened to be a white straight man. In that case it was pretty good.

But the problem with Christ the King is not repaired by talking about it as the Reign of Christ. The problem is much deeper than that and has plagued the church pretty much from the beginning. Within a generation of his very non-kingly trial and execution, Jesus was recreated into something he never claimed to be or for that matter as far as we can tell ever wanted to become. The "son of man" became "king of kings and lord of lords;" the man who lived and loved with such simplicity, gentleness and humility became the one at whose name all would bow, the one who so soon became ensconced in gold and silver and jewels.

It is time for a paradigm shift. As a general rule, I am not attracted to people who use terms like paradigm shift; it always strikes me as pedantic and a little scary—like someone is about to make me change something I don't want to change. But in this area, we have to turn the page, once and for all stopping all this "Christ the King" business because it is really not working for us—not for those of us who claim him as our king and certainly not for the millions we dismiss because of it. Triumphalism has been killing people for centuries. There are many ways of being religious, and no matter how strong our devotion to one way, and my devotion is pretty deep, it is increasingly hard to claim, with a straight face, that Christ is King of the world—or that he should be—maybe particularly that last part about our claim that he should be. My guess is we probably should let Christ be who Christ is, not what we imagine He *ought* to be.

Besides that, the king paradigm hardly works even where it works. The billion or so of my close friends who watched last spring's royal wedding with me did so not because we love the monarchy but because it is a heck of a good show. In fact, one of the reasons we like it so much is that it is so distant from us—the theater, the pageantry of it grabs us because we know somehow it isn't real. It demands absolutely nothing of us; it is a charming and anachronistic cultural lag that most of us take with very little seriousness.

Even in the power driven worlds of business, government and the church, collaboration—if not genuine egalitarianism—is widely recognized as a much more effective way of governing. Every one knows that the leader who constantly has to assert his or her position and power as king or queen, or whatever moniker, has already lost the battle. Real leaders don't have the stress their superiority.

So beyond the largely indisputable claim that *Christus Rex* at this point in time is ineffective in Christianizing the world, if indeed we could agree upon that as our primary commission, it leaves me ice cold as one in search of a savior. The truth is that I am not looking for a king; I am in search of one who knows and loves me, of one upon whose presence I can depend in times of joy and times of sorrow. The child in me, I readily confess, rears its needy head at times of personal crisis in search of an "action-figure Christ" to save the day, but the adult in me recognizes that as the magical thinking it indeed is and understands that what in fact saves the day is the somewhat unexpected but utterly holy

combination of the person God is calling me to be and the presence of Christ in me. Mountains don't suddenly move on command and "happily-ever-afters" don't appear around every corner, but what I *know* is that I can't live without it—without whatever this relationship is; and if that is what it means that Christ is the King of my life, I guess He is.

But that is a far cry, and some will say a watered down one, from the "take-no-captives" clarity found in this passage from the gospel of Matthew. "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" That's "king talk" if ever I heard it, but I don't know that Christ—not at all. Thank God for good scholarship that teaches us that these harsh words of judgment are much more Matthean than authentic Jesus.

Drawing deep lines and tight circles was very important to these early scared Christians; they were so afraid that their new found faith might be ignored, ridiculed or disproven. They took the best of Jesus' teachings—his claim that to love him meant caring for the least among them—and used his words out of their fear not out of nefariousness to divide people rather than to recognize the oneness of us all.

Truth and untruth often get mixed up like that. Matthew got part of it so right: it is our caring for one another that connects us to God, not some creed or doctrine or liturgy. Caring for one another—and particularly for those who are the least among us—that's the path to God. When we do that are we making Christ our king? I don't know; I don't know what that means. Jesus' life and action seemed to say, "Make love your king, your supreme authority." When we do that, are we earning eternal life among the righteous and avoiding eternal punishment? Again, for me, it is the wrong question. When we do that we are doing what makes us better; we are doing what connects us with God at a level that little else does.

In his exquisite poem, *The Hawk*, Franz Wright says that maybe in a million years, a better form of human being will come. He imagines that for himself it might be nice to have come as a hawk, floating above and beyond it all, "filled," he writes with "nothing but God's will the whole day through." That is a lovely image though not as far as I can see a valid option for life. For you see, Christ—a better form of human being who lived a few millennia ago—tugs us inevitably toward one another, indeed toward the least of one another, up close, not distant above. In the mess of our chaos and contradiction, we as Wright suggests, so often heed the call toward that which makes us sick instead of toward that which makes us glad. We need Christ not as a king to whom we are subservient, but as one who can crown us with love that liberates and saves us. It is love, and only love, that is triumphant. And in the end the poet concurs, I think, and points us toward that for which we have come: "while we are still here," he writes, "for one minute, think about this: there is someone right now who is looking to you, not Him, for whatever love still exists." Poet and gospel narrator unite: we are the ones who hold the love, sacred and eternal, that still exists; and both are reminiscent of another voice of truth, William Blake's immortal line: we are here "that we may learn to bear the beams of love."

Indeed.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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