

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Victory through Defeat - November 20, 2022

Luke 23:33-43

We conclude the Christian year as we always do with the story of Jesus suffering on the cross. Next week we start all over again with Advent: the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Yay!

But this week, we read about Jesus crucified, sandwiched between two other convicted criminals. Why this scene? Why this reminder of the lowest point of Jesus' ministry? Why do we conclude our year with such a scene? I mean, don't most conclusion to stories have happy endings?

Friends, this day in our Christian calendar has traditionally be known as "Christ the King" Sunday. In all kinds of Christian artwork, such as what is being displayed on the projector screen beside me, we see King Jesus, looking all royal with crowns and robes, even as he we all know he died naked on a cross.

In recent years, some churches have began to call this "Reign of Christ" Sunday instead of "Christ the King" Sunday and I prefer this change. I'm certainly not against proclaiming Jesus as King and Lord of our lives. The Christian answer for every aspect of human living is that when we make Jesus first in our lives, everything else will fall into place. However, the word "King" is so political, so governmental, so, well, bossy that it appears Jesus is ordering us around.

That's as far from the truth as you can get. Jesus never orders us to obey him. Rather, he asks us to follow him. Yes, he asks, asks, and asks again. However, the choice to follow is ours and how to follow is ours and when to follow is ours.

That's why I prefer the term "Reign of Christ" to "Christ the King." The word reign is indeed synonymous with ruling, but without commanding. A reign suggests that Jesus is our head, our leader, the one who accompanies us and cares for us throughout our journey in life. But it is much more about a companionship and relationship between ourselves and God and that seems much more follow-able than being forced to do as Jesus teaches and act as Jesus acts.

It essentially goes back to a fundamental question of human existence: Why is there evil in the world? The Christian answer is that evil exists directly in proportion to how much we as humans in general and as individuals follow Jesus. The more willing we are to discover and embrace Jesus' way of being, the more peace there will be. When we we truly love God in all ways, when we genuinely love our neighbors as ourselves, then we will enjoy genuine peace in our world.

But that's the problem, isn't it? Following Jesus is more than just agreeing to say certain words or take certain actions in our everyday living. Rather, to follow Jesus daily is an attitude, a mindset, a way of looking at life which places God first, others second, and our own needs and desires last. And yes, that's not easy.

However, I invite you to consider what is going on in our world today and humbly ask where the source is of the problems we face. Consider the problem of pervasive fear in our nation. We just concluded an very painful election during which fear was a predominant topic. We were reminded of supposedly pervasive crime tearing up our neighborhoods. This, despite the fact that the overall crime rate in America has been steadily falling since 1990. We have have been told to fear immigrants, that they are streaming in to our nation to take our jobs and vandalize our homes. The fact is that the crime rate for immigrants is lower than the overall rate and that immigrants take jobs that most established citizens don't want.

Yet, we are the "fear" them. The same "fear" accompanies the racial hatred that accuses Asians of be spreaders of disease, African-Americans of being rapists and thieves, Jews as being engaged in conspiracies to overthrow the government. Perhaps the greatest fear of all that was promoted remains the fear of women displacing men as "leaders of society" and "heads of households." Certain commentators and politicians are decrying the "end of masculinity." The list goes on.

How does such fear-mongering square with the world-view promoted by Jesus? Did Jesus teach us to fear others? Did Jesus confine his ministry to only select individuals? No. Of course not. Jesus specifically and deliberately reached out to people his society rejected. He spent his time on earth trying to prove that those who were held up as the scum of society were actually no different from everyone else.

Jesus welcomed tax collectors, Shepherds, prostitutes. He ministered and healed lepers, women, the blind, the deaf, and the mentally ill. He had to fear to help other nationalities included the hated Romans, the despised Samaritans, and other groups Jews had been taught to hate.

Why? Because Jesus' was all about building and demonstrating a world where all humans were equal. Moreover, all humans would actually believe that all of the other humans on this planet are our equals.

Ahh! But if we believe all other are truly are equals, how can we be afraid of them? What happens to the world if we accept each other instead of fearing each other?

Or what about health care? Yes, health care, Jesus and health care. Let me tell you something, friends, I should be dead. Twenty-seven years ago, I suffered a heart attack in Zambia, Africa. At first, it was diagnosed as an ulcer, but by grace I ended up in the hands of a doctor who read my EKG properly and told me to go to South Africa to have an angioplasty done. Now if I were an ordinary Zambian, that would have been impossible and I probably would have died then. However, my church was able to pay for my flight and my operation.

More recently, just as I was beginning my service with you, I had a hernia repair operation. Unfortunately, there were complications, many complications. I was readmitted to the hospital four times for infections, I had another heart attack and needed a defibrillator to be implanted. For months I walked around with a machine that drained my abdomen and another which would shock my heart in case I had another heart attack.

All in all, I expect my insurance paid over \$1 million to get me back to health. I am grateful to be alive. Yet, I also cannot help but think of those people living in our own country, and the billions more in our world, who do not have access to the same insurance I have. The truth is, I did not pay 1 cent for all my treatment. Others less fortunate might be saddled with hospital bills that they'll be paying the rest of their lives. Still others, of course, would have died due to lack of treatment.

I am certain Jesus is glad I am alive (along with my family and friends). However, I also know Jesus would ask why only some people receive the level of care that I received and most do not. Jesus offered his healing gifts to people at all levels of society. He did not reserve them for the wealthy. In fact he went out of his way to heal the poorest and most despised — the same people who are at the bottom of our health care system even today.

If Jesus is truly our king, if we claim to want to follow his way and proclaim his truth, we must as Christians work to insure access and equality in terms of receiving quality health care. I am fortunate to work for a school district with excellent benefits. But why should our choice of employer dictate the quality of our health care? Indeed many people have to turn down jobs they very much would like to do simply because their employer can't provide the health benefits they need.

I don't have an answer to the problem and it is not the church's place to come up with one. It is, however our role to insist that those who do have the power to invent solutions come up with them — whatever they turn out to be. In short, just as we insist on racial equality, we must also insist on health equality for that, too is part of the Reign of Christ.

I can offer more examples today, but I don't think I have to. If and when we put Jesus first in our lives we must necessarily look at life in very different ways. All of the sudden our wants and needs no longer take center stage but rather are mixed in with the wants and needs of the rest of the world. We cease to think about ourselves as being Number one because if we are number one, everyone else must necessarily be number two, three, four or 8 billion.

This friends is both the glory of and paradox of the Cross. This is the heart of being a Christian: God died so that we can live.

Let's think about that a bit. God died. How can that be? How could almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, be subjected to such a horrible, humiliating, and painful death? By far, crucifixion must be the most brutal and inhumane method of killing a person ever devised.

Yet Jesus had to die in the absolutely worst way possible. He had to in order to prove that he was willing to give everything to us for our benefit. He had to lose. He had to die. He made an example of himself to demonstrate the way all of us should be willing to treat each other.

Imagine a world, friends, in which our fundamental attitude toward our fellow human beings was not one of fear, but one of trust! Imagine a worlds, friends, where we based our decisions not on how they benefit us the most, but how they benefit all people the most! Imagine a world where giving and sacrifice is recognized and welcomed. The givers are our true heroes and those who do nothing but take — they are life's real losers.

Such then is what happens when Jesus is fully the ruler of the world. Such is the peace, joy, serenity that will come with the Reign of Christ.

Now obviously, the world is not here at this time. Jesus concluded his earthly ministry two thousand years ago. Are we any closer to achieving Jesus' vision for the world now than we were back then? Perhaps.

But the point of our faith is that it is not an accomplished fact, it is a movement, a work in progress, a journey on which we are all traveling. None of us living today will see Jesus' vision come true in our lifetimes. Yet we keep trying and we don't ever stop.

Friends, we are the Church of Jesus Christ and we do stand for something. Something powerful, something wonderful. We stand for the dignity, freedom, and equality of every person on the earth. Jesus commanded us to love each other just as we love ourselves. And so we shall.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.