Sermon for Christ the King Sunday

November 21, 2021

John 18:33-37

Grace to you and peace from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.

I’m always a little amused by the conversation between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate would have been so used to controlling things, having the upper hand in situations. But he so clearly doesn’t here, even though he ends up handing Jesus over to die.

The thing is, he doesn’t realize that he doesn’t have the upper hand.

Because he doesn’t understand who Jesus is.

And because he doesn’t understand who Jesus is, he doesn’t have to try to wrap his mind around Jesus’ words.

When Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world,” he’s telling Pilate a lot, and it all goes over Pilates’s head.

What Jesus is telling him is that the Kingdom of God is not like worldly kingdoms. Worldly kingdoms are rooted in worldly things: power, wealth, status.

God’s kingdom is not of those things.

It’s not rooted in power but grace. It’s about peace that surpasses all human understanding. It’s about justice rooted in mercy. And it’s about everyone having *enough* of what they need in life so that they can grow into who God created them to be.

The Pilates of the world simply can’t comprehend that. To them, it’s naïve. That’s not how the world works.

But that’s the point. It *isn’t* how the world works. It wasn’t in Pilate’s time and it isn’t in ours. Yet it is what God promises. It is what God intends for creation.

We serve a king like no other. We serve a God who invites us to imagine a different way. To imagine a future that contains hope for all of creation. To ponder what the world will be like when God’s plans for creation come to fullness. And then to ask ourselves why—if God’s plans for creation are so amazing, so *good*—why we settle for and accept so much less now.

So much of my time these days seems to be filled with trying to imagine what the future holds. How can we safely celebrate Christmas together, here in this place? When can I safely travel to a conference and gather with colleagues again? When will those who haven’t felt comfortable attending worship in person feel comfortable sitting among us? As we prepare to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the congregation next fall, what can that look like?

Sadly, ordination does not confer upon us the ability to foresee the future with any greater accuracy than we had before. Nor does it confer upon us the ability to read minds.

(I’m generally grateful for that last one.)

In the midst of all this uncertainty, some people have found it too painful to allow themselves to dream, to hope for things, in the future, only to have that future delayed. When dreams are indefinitely delayed, it becomes all too easy to stop dreaming.

And when we stop dreaming, we stop imagining what *can be*.

And when that happens, we risk becoming Good Friday people, who have no cause for hope, rather than being Easter people, people who dare to hope, who dare to dream, who dare to imagine what *can be*.

Jesus didn’t die so things could continue as they were.

Jesus died because he was the embodiment of God’s plans for how things *will be* when God’s Kingdom is fully realized. When wealth and power and status are not the goals of a people, but grace and mercy and justice and peace beyond our comprehension are.

The Pilates of the world simply cannot abide such an idea.

Even though our human efforts won’t bring the Kingdom of God to fruition, we are nonetheless invited into the work that anticipates its fullness.

Which, for us, includes our annual offering of our time, talents, and treasures.

When we reach November 20, 2022, Christ the King Sunday next year, what we are then is because of what we offer up in our gifts of our time, talents, and treasures between now and then.

Within the next few days, you’ll be receiving your time and talent forms and pledge forms in the mail. I join the stewardship team in my hopes that you will prayerfully consider how you fill those forms out. They allow the church council and the various teams of this congregation to imagine the future. They encourage us to dream of new ways to allow each of you to use the gifts you were given in service to our neighbors.

And, in this uncertain, tumultuous world we live in, they are a defiant statement of hope that the darkest days are behind us and of trust in the promises that God will provide for our needs.

I can’t promise next year will be better. But I have hope.

And I have hope for the simple reason that I trust in the words of Jesus, that the Kingdom of God is *already* in the midst of us.

It’s just really hard to see it sometimes.

We’re about to enter the season of Advent, my favorite of the whole church year, even if all the hymns that get stuck in my head are in a minor key and seem vaguely sad because of it.

Inevitably, someone will ask why we don’t sing Christmas hymns during Advent. Which is because it’s not Christmas yet.

In the church, we like to take our festivals one at a time. We like to prepare for them. And so we wait and listen during Advent, hearing John’s reminder of our need for repentance and the insistent hope of what *can be* that permeates the songs of Zechariah and Mary. We wait, in hope and anticipation, both for the celebration of the birth of Christ and for his return.

And today, we prepare for not just Advent, but the whole church year to come, with a reminder of why that baby was important. For that, we turn to the words of Revelation: Grace to you and peace from him *who is and who was and who is to come*. The Alpha and the Omega, our beginning and our end, the Almighty.

The One who is and who was and who is to come is not impressed by worldly things like power and wealth. Such things do not impress the One who created the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them.

God knows there are better things for us to seek in life, better uses for the gifts we have been given. And God invites us to stop settling for less than. Less than enough food or shelter or love or dignity. For us and for others.

Knowing that our efforts will fall short and that we are sometimes painfully imperfect beings, but trusting that we are forgiven by our God who remembers our sins no more, we are invited to offer our time and talents and treasures with hearts filled to overflowing with joy and hope.

May it be so for us.