

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, November 20, 2022

Luke 23:33-43

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We don't have queens and kings in the United States today. Except, of course, when there is a royal wedding. Then we all tune in to see the wonderful dresses and the hats and the fine suits and the pageantry, as if these two people who are affirming their love and commitment and sexuality and new life and happiness, represented all of us as a people, even as a species and our own love and commitment and sexuality and new life and happiness.

More recently, around the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, many people reflected on the way she embodied the best ideals of her people. In her public personal, at least, she displayed a certain decorum that went beyond mere politeness, that conveyed a respect for other people as persons. She displayed toughness without bravado, and a down to earth, practical compassion.

Tell me, who do you think embodies the best ideals of our nation, here in the United States? Who is our leader? Maybe George Washington, who said, "I cannot tell a lie." So, we tell the truth. Or Abraham Lincoln, who walked something like three miles to return a penny. So, we keep our word. Maybe Harriet Tubman, who led people to freedom and fought for freedom, or Mother Jones, who fought against abusive child labor practices in the mines and textile mills of Appalachia, and said, "Pray for the dead, fight like hell for the living!"

Aren't you glad I didn't mention any contemporary presidents?

Oh, no, but that would be getting political in the church.

And yet, the Gospel lesson for today is clearly, explicitly, fundamentally political. The cross was a political tool that the Roman Empire used to crush any political movement that was not approved and controlled by Rome. Many leaders have access to an army of some kind, to protect them. They may be able to direct great wealth to the achievement of their agendas, and convey a kind of glory, a charisma where people look up to them.

The Romans would take all of that away. They to kill you, but not just to kill you. They wanted to rob you of any power or wealth or glory you might have. No noble death in battle. No honorable suicide when all is lost. No, they would hang you naked on a cross so that you peed yourself in front of everybody, so that you begged for mercy, to wept in misery, in front of everyone.

In our Scripture for today, the Romans put up a sign above Jesus's head, "This is the king of the Jews." Again, political. As if to say "This is what happens to any king who is not set up by Rome." It's to humiliate not just Jesus, but all Jews.

And they came up to Jesus offering him wine, as if to say, "Have some wine, O King." But it was sour wine. They put a crown on his head. But it was a crown of thorns.

And the soldiers and leaders of the people continued the Devil's temptation. Back near the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, in Chapter 3, Jesus is praying out in the desert and the devil comes to tempt him. Jesus has not eaten in over a month, and the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." In other words, use your power to benefit yourself. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple, because the angels will catch you, the angels will save you." Again, use your power to benefit yourself. Jesus prevails against the devil, and the devil leaves him, it says, "Until a more opportune time."

Well now that more opportune time has come. Jesus is hanging on the cross in horrible pain, dying, and the soldiers and the leaders say, "If you are the Messiah, save yourself. If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." In other words, use your power for yourself.

The strange, upside-down thing about it is that Jesus really is the king of the Jews. He really is the Messiah, precisely because he is on the cross, precisely because he chooses not to use his power to benefit himself.

What does Jesus do with his power on the cross? Does he call his angel armies down from heaven? We will hear about those angel armies in a few weeks, at Christmas. That's what the heavenly host is, an army of angels. But does this army of angels come down and kill the Romans? No, it does not. What does it do? It sings. Could it be that singing is more powerful than killing?

Does Jesus call down his army of angels to execute vengeance against his enemies? No, he does not. What does he do? He forgives. He says, "Father, forgive them. . ." Maybe he's talking about the soldiers and leaders of the people. Someone suggested to me today that when he says "forgive them," he's asking God to forgive us, all of us, everyone. Because we human beings, we crucify each other all the time.

What does Jesus say to the criminal hanging next to him? Instead of calling down judgement, he says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Could it be that mercy is more powerful than judgement?

This is our king, the one we follow. This is the one who embodies our best ideals, who makes us who we are as a Christian people. So, how do we use our power, however great or small, our wealth, which may seem so tiny when we're paying the bills, our glory, to bless others and creation like he did?

The difference between a tyrant and a leader is that tyrants use their power to benefit themselves. Leaders use their power to bless others and creation. The difference between a despot and a good ruler is that a despot uses her or his power to hang on to power. A good ruler serves.

Here are two examples of people with power who served. And I'm not going to talk about presidents. I'm going to talk about teachers: Mrs. Ainsworth and Mr. Day. Mrs. Ainsworth taught the summer school I had to go to when I was in second grade.

Now, school for me was a stressful place. I know some of you love school and that's great. When I was in school, I had to work very hard to stay in my reading group,

the green reading group. I wished I could be in the yellow reading group because they were the fast readers. They were the smart kids. And I was terrified of falling behind into the blue reading group, which were the slow readers. So, I worked really hard to stay in the green group.

This, in spite of the fact that the letters kept moving around on the page. The “a’s” and the “e’s” in words kept switching back and forth. and sevens and nines always looked like the same number. My parents had me tested and the people doing the testing said, “Well, he’s in second grade. He’s got a fourth-grade reading level, but he’ll never get past fourth grade because he’s memorizing what the words look like. He’s not actually reading the letters.”

So I had to actually learn to read the letters at summer school. My mother drove me forty-five minutes each way from Ocean Springs through Biloxi to Gulfport, Mississippi. In Mrs. Ainsworth’s class, there were no yellow or blue or green reading groups. We were just going to look at these letters and see what they say. It was hard, that was okay for it to be hard, we were just going to look at these letters. Take your time.

Now, back in those days, children were barbarians. Not like now. Children are not barbarians now. Back in those days, it was a thing that, on your birthday, you would get swatted on your rear one time for each year you had lived. Well, the other kids found out one day that it was my birthday. So they said, “Swat him one time for every year!” and Mrs. Ainsworth said “ok,” and came up to me and patted me on the shoulder, “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.”

And all that stress and fear uncoiled, floated out the open window and dissipated in the summer air.

The next year, Mr. Day always wore a dark sport coat and a white shirt, no tie, dark pants and leather shoes. He had a close-cropped beard and dark brown hair, brown eyes. When he walked into the room, everything fell into and orderly calm. “We’re just gonna look at these letters and see what they say. It’s okay if it’s hard. Just gonna look. . .”

I doubt that Mrs. Ainsworth or Mr. Day remembered me. I was one of perhaps a thousand children they worked with over the course of their lives. I was not

particularly remarkable. And I suspect they may have had many moments when they felt like their power was just a drop in the bucket in comparison to the need for special education in southern Mississippi in 1970, That there was not nearly enough money being put into their work, that it was not regarded with the level of glory, of respect, or honor that it deserved. They may have asked themselves whether their work did any good at all. But they changed my life.

Because they used their power to serve, I can read.

The ancient Hebrew word for “King” is “Melech.” And the Melech in Scripture watches out for the people who would otherwise be left behind. The ancient Greek word for king is “Basileus,” same root as the word “Basilica.” You hear about St. Peter’s Basilica. That’s the seat of the basileus, the king, Jesus. And the basileus exercises authority, exsousia. Exousia does not mean pounding people on the head. It means getting things done.

How do we use our power, our exousia, the many different abilities and positions that we have, to serve?

Thanks be to God.