

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the last Sunday in the church year, and it is called “Christ the King” Sunday. We Americans have a kind of love/hate relationship with kings. 241 years ago we began a Revolutionary War in order to throw off the yoke of the British rule. This country’s Declaration of Independence includes a long list of accusations against King George III, whose tyranny and taxation and abuses of power led the American colonies to establish a new kind of government, one in which there was no divine right of kings. At the same time, all these years later, we can still gauge our fascination with royalty, even here in the United States, by how many magazine covers feature photos of the British royal family.

In ancient times, a king was a warrior. A king held onto power by brute force. A king took what he wanted – land, hostages, plunder – with violence. Plenty of passages in the bible describe the violence of warfare. Cities overrun and burned, the slaughter of innocent civilians as well as soldiers, the taking of treasure and slaves. That is what kings did in the ancient world. They fought over territory.

So the image of a king as a shepherd, seeking the lost and strayed sheep, leading his flocks to good pasture, is a surprising picture of power turned upside down. The prophet Ezekiel reminded his audience of David, the great king, who started out as a shepherd. The promise that Ezekiel gave to those who were exiled in Babylon is that God would seek them out, too. God will find them in their exile and gather them up. God will feed them in rich pasture. And God will provide another shepherd, another David, to provide for them.

Power turned upside down. That is what Jesus came to demonstrate. It wasn’t an appealing message for those who were living under the thumb of Roman occupation. Many

of those who encountered Jesus were looking for a new warrior king. They wanted a new David. They wanted a leader who would overthrow Rome and re-establish the kings of Israel. But that is not what Jesus came to earth to accomplish.

With all of the baggage that the word “king” carries, we still call this Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. Today is the Sunday when we contemplate Christ’s power and glory. Today is the Sunday when we imagine the day when Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

This Gospel passage is the only place in the entire New Testament where the last judgment is described. And I have to tell you that I struggle with this passage. I have a hard time with the starkness of the line drawn between the sheep and the goats. I don’t want to hear that anyone will be cursed by God, and thrown into eternal fire. But then I remember that in Jesus, power is turned upside down.

There are plenty of churches where the words “triumph,” “power,” and “glory” can easily be found. Where the message is about an “awesome God” who is the source of wealth and prosperity and a purpose-driven life. It is an attractive message. We want to know that we are on God’s right side. We want to know that we are counted among the sheep, as Jesus puts it, not among the goats.

The problem with this outlook is that we then spend time looking around at other people and make comparisons. Saved or not saved? In or out? Blessed or cursed? We spend time doing one of two things: either imagining all the ways we are better than other folks and congratulating ourselves on our status, or imagining all the ways we are worse and worrying that we aren’t going to make it.

Today's Gospel passage begins this way: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory..." Jesus has talked about the Son of Man all throughout Matthew's gospel, but what exactly does he mean by this "coming in glory?" The verse that comes right after the end of this passage gives us a clue: When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'" Coming in glory. Crucifixion. Might it be that the place that we see Jesus' glory most clearly is in the cross? A king who was born in a feed trough, who lived among those on the bottom of society and who died on the most horrifying torture device invented. Jesus' glory is not what we think it is. Jesus' glory is power turned upside down.

This scene at the end of Matthew's gospel shouldn't surprise you. Because 20 chapters earlier in Matthew's story, on the side of a mountain, Jesus preached his first sermon. And the first words out of his mouth were these: "Blessed are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...the pure in heart...the peacemakers...the persecuted..." Not the powerful, not the wealthy, not the politically connected, not the 1%. Jesus' regard is always for those at the bottom of the heap, and if you want to see him, that's where you should look.

What does Jesus look like to you? There are several pictures on our walls of a serene-looking man with European features. That might be an image of Jesus that gives you comfort, as it has for many people. But it does not give us a full picture of Jesus. The harder question is this: Do you see Jesus in the weathered face of the homeless veteran? Or in the tattooed face of the gangbanger in prison? Or in the worried face of the waitress working a second shift in order to pay the rent? Or in the red face of the guy with a

drinking problem who eats lunch at Closer to Home? “That’s who I am,” says Jesus. “That’s where I can be found.”

The difference between sheep and goats has nothing to do with doctrines or with theology. Neither the sheep nor the goats had any idea of what they were doing. They simply went about their daily business. But the difference is that the sheep recognized that they lived in a web of connection with everyone else in the community, connections that meant that when they saw someone in need or suffering, they helped. The goats weren’t sinners in the conventional sense of doing bad things, like killing or stealing. They just figured that they had achieved what they had on their own and that everyone else ought to fend for themselves as well.

One more detail: Matthew tells us that in this scene of judgment, the *nations* will be gathered before the Son of Man. So it bears reflecting on the work of our own nation, the wealthiest nation that has ever existed. If we claim, as many people do, that the United States is a Christian nation, then we should prepare to be judged. Not on the number of trade deals or tax cuts or executive orders, but on how we the people take care of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, and the strangers among us. Power turned upside down.

Jesus makes it clear that there will be a reckoning. There will be a moment when evil and good will be separated from each other. But the Gospel also makes it clear that the reckoning is God’s to make, not ours. And the good news is, Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead so that we might be judged with mercy.

God created the world out of an abundance of love, love that God repeatedly pours out on all people. In sending Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God’s love came to live among us.

God's love lives within us. It is not about power to conquer or destroy. The over-arching story of the Bible is that God wants a relationship, connection with God's people. God's power is power for life, not for death. God's power rescues us out of the dead zones and creates in us new life. And salvation is not something that we earn, but something we discover – when we discover that we have shared ourselves freely without expectation.

Christ the king is not dressed in a tuxedo, waving to us from a balcony. Christ the king is not a conquering warrior, making Christian soldiers out of us. Christ the king is the shepherd who goes looking for the lost and strayed sheep and calls us to do the same. Christ our king comes to us right here in this sanctuary, surrounded as we are by signs of his presence: water, bread and wine, and most importantly, an empty cross.

And then Christ our king sends us out from here into the community where we live, into the web of connections and relationships all around us. We are called to see Jesus Christ in the faces of the people we encounter every day. The faces of those we know well, and those we don't know. The faces of our family and our friends, and the faces of the cashiers and store clerks, the secretaries and the college students. The faces of those who live in big houses and those who live in trailer parks. The faces of those we fed at our Fall Feast and the faces of those we feed at Closer to Home. Christ's power is turned upside down. Christ is the shepherd and the shepherd is the king.