

“A Reign of Christ Is a Reign of Love” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey 11/25/07
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church

Colossians 1:11-20 May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Creator, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the power of the empty cross.

Luke 10: 25-28 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

[Sermon given on the Sunday Collection of Christmas toys for immigrant children in the El Grupo de la Comida community.]

LOOK AT WHAT WE HAVE DONE! As far as I can tell, every single assigned gift has been delivered --40 gifts for 40 new, disoriented, poverty-stricken, immigrant residents of our city.

We do this every year, and it is not always so easy. I have spent many Sunday afternoons running around, calling folks and buying extra gifts, sometimes driving over to *Mission Iglesia* on Monday night or asking Phoebe to collect late gifts. Even this year, as of Monday we had over a dozen unclaimed names. I called my own kids, and each of them happily took two names, and then Carol and Marcie and Margaret took some extras as well. For one child, I remembered that I had a gift stashed away from last year. Seems that one of you was delivering her gift late on Monday and asked Gustavo [our Spanish-speaking custodian] to put it in my office. Bless his heart, Gustavo thought she was giving him a gift and took it home! He was surprised to find a talking telephone and some drawing materials! Anyway, the giver – I think it was Laura -- replaced it; Gustavo returned it; I saved it; and now it is in this pile waiting for an appreciative child!

I hope this sight makes each of you feel good as well! My heart swells in gratitude and respect for this community!

It is interesting to me that we are collecting these gifts on the Sunday traditionally called Christ the King Sunday. This is a liturgical designation instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, which, frankly, we at NVM rarely observe. As Phoebe pointed out, this church studiously avoids hierarchical or tyrannical words like Lord and King. But 1925 was a year of the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, the Scopes Evolution Trial, and a deadly attack on St Nedelya Church in the Bulgarian capital Sofia. Pope Pius saw Christ's kingship as an antidote to the rise of secularism and dictatorships. He hoped that a Feast Day to Christ the King would speak to the many Christians, even Catholics, who were doubting Christ's authority, as well as the Church's, and even doubting Christ's existence.

The Pope must have known a child like Scholar Elbert Russell's grandson. "Grandpa," he said one December morning, "I have made a discovery." "What is that?" his grandfather asked. "I have found out all about Santa Claus, the myth of Christmas." There was an embarrassed silence around the breakfast table. Then the boy added, "And that's not all. When I get a little older, I'm going to look into this Jesus business." The old professor braced himself, looked straight into the eyes of young Russell, and said, "And I hope you do. And if you look into this Jesus business seriously, he'll get you just like he got me."

I doubt Dr. Russell was thinking of Christ as King in that moment. More likely he was thinking of the realm or reign of Jesus, -- a chosen way of life, rather than required obedience to a ruler. A reign allows you to give your heart to someone or something, rather than simply demanding allegiance. It gives room for Jesus to "get you." But it does beg the question -- Just who is this Jesus we listen to and learn from and yes, worship, each Sunday? What is there to say of this One we follow, this Son of God, who probably is rolling his eyes at our even talking about him this way? In the time of Jesus, one aspect of a "King" we often overlook is the father-figure someone in whom the people found their identity. How is Jesus our identity, as Christians?

The beautiful reading from Colossians certainly offers us one response. Paul is quoting an early Christian hymn. Haven't we often said that poetry and music often express the heart of God more easily than narrative? These stirring words tell of a power that is unlimited, eternal, and the glue to everything that exists. They were offered to the church at Colossae, some 100 miles inland from Ephesus, where the young Christians were being influenced by a spiritual Gnostic movement. This thinking separated leadership from the people, and replaced reliance on the grace of God and of Jesus with reliance on special knowledge and mysterious ritual. Understanding of God thus relied on mystical experiences and revelation. But Paul wants to remind this congregation that all the fullness of God is inherent in this one person, Jesus; the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation. The Spirit or Logos of Jesus, existent long before the incarnation, embraces all things made by God. He makes a point of speaking of Jesus' death on the cross, as only a moment in our time; his resurrection is life forever.

It reminds me of a report that when Buckingham Palace was bombed in World War 2, Queen Mother said she was glad they had been bombed. That meant she could look the people of London in the face, knowing that she had shared in a common experience, that being royalty did not mean an exemption from suffering, from loss, from death. That

is perhaps a good part of who Jesus is for us. Jesus knows us. God in Christ has been with us, one of us. All who are in Christ share in a profound redemptive love and in a integral coherence Christ offers to our hearts and souls. Ours is a God who actually experiences the human condition and to whom we have a direct and intimate connection remains unique and unprecedented in a deity.

Jesus as “the first born” underscores this relational God: it is the image of Christ as an older brother - the first born member of a family which includes all of us, a dynamic relationship between God and ourselves and all other creatures living in his world.

When Christ's power and love so fill our hearts, our minds, and our souls that we simply cannot contain that gift of divine grace, we overflow with genuine Christian enthusiasm. A reign of Christ, then, leads us to love our enemies, welcome strangers, share our abundance, pray for our persecutors. This is what we celebrate today. This is the formula that Jesus offered for living within a reign of Christ: Love God purely and deeply, with your heart and soul and mind and strength. Then love your neighbor as yourself.

In all three synoptic Gospels, Jesus follows this formula or commandment with a story, a simple little story about a man who fell among thieves who stripped him, beat him, robbed him and left him for dead. You all know the story. Two priestly types walked by the man but did not help. Foreigner, a Samaritan, was moved with compassion and bandaged the fellow, taking him to an inn and paying for his recovery time. But, it's not a simple story; it goes to the heart of what it means to live under the reign of Jesus.

In the winter of 1990, Michael Peterson was asked to appear on a television talk show in Toronto, Ontario, Canada (story told in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*) At the end of the first day of taping he was on his way back to his plush, high-rise, cable-TV, 24-hour room service hotel, when he saw something he'd never seen before. Lying on the sidewalk against a building in four inches of snow was a man sleeping with only a cardboard blanket to keep him from being completely exposed to the freezing cold. What really broke Peterson's heart was when he realized that the man wore no shoes or socks. He thought he should stop and help the man but he wasn't quite sure what to do. As the traffic light turned green, it seemed life was demanding that he move along. So, that's what he did. Back in the luxurious environment of his hotel, he promptly forgot about the man on the street.

Several days later, prior to the morning taping, he was having coffee and Danish in the green room at the station. All of the "important" people had left the room and only he and the janitor were left. Peterson had seen the janitor go quietly about his business every day while he was there. The man never said a word except "Good morning" or "Can I get anything for you, sir?" He always had a smile to give to everyone.

When Peterson asked the janitor how he was feeling today, the man told him that he'd been having to ride his bike to work in the snow and that he'd been feeling rather sorry for himself . . . that is, until he saw a man sleeping down on the corner of Yonge Street and Bloor with just a piece of cardboard for covering from the cold and no shoes.

Michael Peterson says he almost choked on his Danish as he heard this simple janitor go on to relate how he was so moved with compassion for this homeless man that he went around the corner to a store and bought the man a pair of socks and shoes.

As Peterson listened to the janitor tell his story, he saw in his mind a poster that used to be in an old friend's bedroom when he was a teenager. It was a picture of a child handing someone a flower. The caption read: "The smallest deed always exceeds the grandest of intentions." That's good, isn't it? "The smallest deed always exceeds the grandest of intentions."

Peterson said he stood there wishing it was he who had bought the shoes and socks for the man. When Peterson went home that day, he looked for the man on the street. He was gone, but he knew it wouldn't be long before someone took his place.

The heart of authentic faith is love. We still live in a world of ancient hatreds. It is a world in which might continues to make right. It is still a world where an eye is exchanged for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Can we not see that this is a formula for disaster? Only when we truly love God and truly love our neighbor can there be any hope for the world. Ultimately that is the answer to the world's most profound needs.

So in a world according to Jesus, we are called to work to eliminate exploitations of war or business or globalization -- anything that leads to abuse. And we are called to do practical things like feed, clothe, visit, and to advocate on their behalf and to seek justice. We are called to the wonder of meeting God in little spaces as well as the expanded heavens, and to serve the immediate God in little ways, a smile, a hug, a handshake, a cup of water, a bowl of soup, a moment's careful attention, a meal served to the homeless or a gift to a young immigrant.

Today, with these gifts, we are helping Beth Abrams be the Good Samaritan to hundreds, yes hundreds of children, to help them feel welcomed in a strange new world, and to help their parents, hundreds of them, feel like they can offer their kids some hope. And here is the ultimate testimony to the power of God's love. In Christ's world, it is not even necessary to say his name. It is perfect that his hands for these kids will be the hands of an observant Jewish woman who devotes her life to helping the oppressed. We are so lucky to be part of that. Thanks be to God!

"I believe God dwells with those who make love their aim. And, there is no sentimentality in this love; it is not endlessly pliable, always yielding. Prophets from Amos to Isaiah to Gandhi and King have shown how frequently compassion demands confrontation. Love without criticism is a kind of betrayal. Lying is often done with silence as well as with words. And, always the love that is of God lies on the far side of justice, never on the near side."

William Sloane Coffin