

Sermon Text: Luke 23:33-43

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, one of our members this morning said that I could not let this service go by without saying something about the Clemson/Carolina game. I really don't know exactly what to say. My daughter is going to law school at Carolina. My son-in-law went to Clemson. I did point out to another of our members that our carpet here in the sanctuary looks a little bit like Carolina garnet, and he, a Clemson fan, said, “We stomp all over that, too.” Now, I think that's enough. I'm going to leave that alone. I thought about having you switch sides, and see how we divide up. I think it's pretty even.

Today's title was supposed to have been “A King on a Cross.” I miscommunicated with Emmie this week. A king on a cross with a question mark.

You know, I've seen many boxes of genealogical research and stapled together booklets that families have done among my church members over the years, who claimed kinship with kings and queens of other countries. My late grandfather paid a reputable researcher to trace the Dennis family. The most notable finding was that our bloodline came from a man, who was deported from Ireland for stealing horses. No kings. No queens. Not one in the bunch.

The only king that I can claim is King Jesus. His earthly throne was a wooden cross. There is a deep humility in the kingship of Jesus, a deep humility. I suspect that the more you feel related to the king of kings, the less you are concerned about to whom you are related in this world. To tell you the truth, I've never sung the old favorite; it's a wonderful song, but the old favorite hymn, “I Am a Child of the King.” Does anyone know that? Would you come sing that? No. Okay. I am a child of the King. I imagine that knowing in your heart you are a child of the King gives you a completely different outlook on the world.

Before the Civil War, there was a sad, but telling story. Before the Civil War, there were some visitors from the North, who were watching a company of slaves in New Orleans wearily shuffling along the dock, but one in particular, there was a striking contrast, held his head erect and with a sort of a regalness about him. A striking contrast. He had an unbroken spirit, and he strode among them with a dignified bearing. The rest hunched over and were broken. Some of the observers asked, “Who is that fellow? Is he an owner of the slaves or a straw boss?” Someone said, “No. That fellow just cannot get it out of his head that he is the son of a king.” And so he was. He had been dragged into slavery as a small child, and he was already taught, though even as a child, that he was no ordinary person. He was the son of a king. Now after half a lifetime of hardship and abuse, which had broken the spirits of others, he was still the son of a king.

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As Christians, our self-esteem and our identity comes neither from what we have done nor from what we can do. It comes from to whom we belong; whom we serve, and we serve our servant king, Jesus Christ. Along that vein, I am not the head of this church, and none of you are the head of this church. Christ is the head of this church. If we have that understanding of the truth of that statement and the depth of that statement, I believe that we would go about things with a different spirit, a spirit of humility. We cannot do more for ourselves to raise up our names or endear ourselves to God than has already been done for us by our King, Jesus. In humility, all that we can do is accept the freely-given grace and love and forgiveness and pass it on to others. The humility of Jesus' death on the cross should be echoed by our humility in serving in other ways.

The dark side to that is that without God's grace we are helpless and hopeless. Knowing that we cannot earn it, and that it has been freely given should make us humble and generous to others. It should. It should.

There's a story I like. Actor Kevin Bacon had a conversation with his six-year-old son after he had first seen the movie that made him famous, "Footloose." Bacon's son asked, "Dad, that was really cool how you jumped up on the roof and swung down from the rafters. How did you do that?" Kevin Bacon said, "Well, son, I didn't actually do that. A stuntman did that." The son said, "A stuntman? What is that?" He said, "Well, that is someone who dresses like me and looks like me and does things that I can't do." His son said, "Oh, well, what about that part in the movie where you spin around on the gym bar and land on your feet? How did you do that?" Kevin Bacon said, "Well, son, that was a stuntman again. That was not I. He's really good at gymnastics." His son said, "Oh." There was a long pause. His son asked, "Dad, just what did you do in that movie?" Then Kevin Bacon sheepishly replied, "Well, I got all the glory. I got all the glory."

It sort of sounds familiar here. Jesus took all the dives for us, suffered all the blows and the wounds like the stuntman for us in that we might win the glory by being redeemed and ushered into Heaven as children of the Father. What a King!

Two people under the cross on that fateful day recognized the royal quality of the King on a cross. Even as He hung there bleeding and wounded and dying, one was what we call the good thief. The good thief said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom." This man could see through the blood and the beating and the spittle on Jesus that He was, what hung there was God, a king, for only such could suffer what He was going through and still say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." There was another man who saw something great in the deep humility and suffering of Jesus. It was the Roman centurion. He had followed Jesus from the middle of the city, had seen the torture and the blows and the whipping of Jesus, and he had seen how Jesus responded with gentleness and not bitterness. The centurion had seen hundreds of men crucified, and they were all blaspheming and cursing as they died, but this man, Jesus, was forgiving and thinking about others as He died. The Roman centurion in awe and wonderment said, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

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One other man earlier in the day recognized the kingship of Jesus. We spoke of him in the creed, Pilate. Pilate had an inscription in wood put over his head. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Pilate may have wanted to aggravate the Jewish high priesthood with that inscription, but he may also have believed in his heart that Jesus was indeed a king for even as he interrogated Jesus, Pilate asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus did not deny it even though He knew that would cost Him His life. He said to Pilate in return, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over, but as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

He is unlike any earthly king. Jesus used His power for others and not for himself.

Several years ago, a pastor, Irwin Lutzer, and his daughters were visiting Washington, DC, and while they were there, they met a man, who had served as the former Secret Service security officer for the first President Bush. The gentleman offered to give them a guided tour of the Oval Office. Well, Pastor Lutzer and his daughters passed through many security checkpoints, and they went all the way to the Oval Office. At each checkpoint, they expected to be searched and questioned, but instead the guards took one glance at the retired Secret Service man and announced, “Okay, you’re with him? Go on in.” You’re with him. You go on in. Pastor Lutzer wrote later that he expects our entrance into Heaven to be something like that. He said we will have no credentials of our own that could possibly get us in, but Jesus will be walking along beside us, and at each gate perhaps the angels will take one look at Jesus and announce, “You’re with Him. Okay. Go on in.”

If we derive our identity from what we own or where we live or how much we have, there will always be a combat, there will always be a counting, there will always be a pecking order, there will always be a competition, but if we truly accept in humility that I can do nothing to impress God, our King, and in the same thought accept that God in Christ loves me as much as the cross and forgives me as completely as the East is from the West, if I own that I can only own that in humility, then sometime sooner or later, I will understand that the proper response to God in Christ is trust, complete trust, and humility.

After trust and humility, a life of service out of thankfulness for what God has done for us. If my King is humble unto death on a cross, how should I be? If my King is loving even though it cost Him the cross, how should I be? If my King forgives even as He is nailed on a cross, how should I live? If we see ourselves as beloved by a king who stoops so low to love us, humble on that cross, how should we live? If we knew ourselves as that beloved of God, maybe we wouldn’t fritter away our lives pursuing stuff to make us bigger. If we lived our lives looking up at our King on a cross, and knew it was out of love for us, then maybe we wouldn’t degrade ourselves with ambitions unworthy of us. Who are we? We are those for whom Christ gave His life. We are beloved by a king on a cross.

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This is the very last Sunday of the Christian year. Advent is the first Sunday of the next Christian year. Our journey through the Gospel goes round and round and ends up here, lifting up Jesus as king in a way that turns people off in what's considered scandalous and absurd from the very beginning. Jesus as King on the Cross is a scandal. It is a stumbling block of the mind for so many.

The ancient Hebrews knew. They saw the world had power that was always tied up with violence and military strength. The ancient Hebrews knew that, and they even expected that in their Savior. Today in politics, everyone talks peace, but every nation prepares for war at one and the same time. Scripture travels through the violent times. Up until God took upon Himself in Jesus the power of violence and the power of sin and death, and the cross seems to me to be an exclamation point, God crying enough. This is who I am! Behold the man! Behold the Savior! Behold the cross and what you do to innocence and what you do to true love and what you do to each other! From that cross, behold Him saying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

We see the power of the creator humbled on a cross in love with us instead of enraged. The humility, if you can fathom it, astounds! What any of us has to be arrogant or prideful about in the face of the Cross also astounds. Humility and power are rarely seen together, but a few years ago in Thailand there was a civil unrest, almost a war, and the people filled the streets to protest. The military government had installed a prime minister without any sort of vote, and the government reacted with a brutal massacre of unarmed protestors, and there were days of riots and destruction and chaos, and the people refused to go back home. The government refused to give into the people's demands. At last, there beloved king, who was only just a title of king, no real power, but the beloved king of Thailand called the disputed Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition into his palace. In deference to the king, to centuries of tradition, and popular affection for the king, they both humbly knelt before him, and the king ordered the two parties to stop fighting and end the violence and work things out. In less than one day, the disturbances were over, and the phony prime minister was on his way out of the country, and peace was restored. It is a rare thing when we see humility and power together.

In our own lives, we have conflicts. Have we called upon the King of God in Christ? Do we humbly defer what we have and what we are to the one who gave Himself for us? You know, His way cost Him! It is a better way than violence and competition and death. His way is the way of giving love and encouragement and hope. Subjects of the king don't mind the humility of service because Jesus, like no king who came before, was servant Himself, making known God's love and hope wherever He went.

Years ago, in the Korean conflict, Billy Graham visited American soldiers who had been injured. One day as he was visiting a hospital, he found a boy who had gotten a bullet in his spine, and he had to lay face down on a cot. They cut a hole out so that he could see, but he could see only the floor. The young soldier asked Billy Graham, “I would like to see your face, Mr. Graham.” Billy got on his back, and scooted under the cot so that the

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boy could see his face. It's a wonderful illustration of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

He came to this earth so that we could connect with Him in the only form that we really understand, as a human. Today, we celebrate the kingship of this God in flesh, Jesus Christ, a king who can bring peace, a king who comes down to our level to give hope and comfort. That's the kind of king Jesus is. That's the kind of God Jesus reveals. Jesus was not a king in the way that anyone expected Him to be. He was reversed, and He still reverses all the ways the world expects kings to be. He said, “The first shall be last, the last shall be first, the rich shall be poor, and the poor made rich. Prostitutes are closer to the kingdom than the apparent righteous. Resurrection only after crucifixion. To live one must first die himself. To be great is to serve. The ultimate reversal, the king of kings reigns over a garbage heap called the skull. The strong one in David's line cannot carry even his own cross. His entourage are criminals on each side. His finest wine is vinegar. The court games are dice for his own garments. His adoring courtiers are stoppers and mockers, his throne a cross, his coronation his own death, and just before darkness obliterates the carnage, we spy a homemade marker crudely scrawled, “This is the King of the Jews.”

Perhaps nowhere as in this spectacle does the radicalness of the Gospel stand exposed. Our symbol, the symbol of our faith, is a scandalous cross! Scandal in Greek means something you trip over. Our power as the Church is our loyalty to Christ the King, our humility and self-giving love as we follow Him. Each of us has a purpose to know God and to show God as Jesus did. Until we set upon that path, no one has peace. Without God in Christ as king of your life, everything is distorted, out of kilter, rotating around you and yourself, your pride, your own confusion. We can and do run away and reject God and serve ourselves. We turn our backs, and we sometimes don't want to be loved, don't want to be forgiven; instead we wallow in self-pity and bitterness. We don't want to be a blessing. Sometimes we're mad, and we would rather be a curse. We humans can be a stubborn and selfish lot. It must be difficult for Jesus to build a kingdom with such unwilling subjects, as we know we often are, but we have faith. Faith not in ourselves or anything that we have done or could do. We have faith that in the end, the lamb wins. The lamb, the Christ of God, the King of Kings wins and keeps His children with Him so there is no place for pride, no place for arrogance, no place for bitterness or judgment of others in our faith. No place at all as we serve a humble king on a cross.

I want to leave you with this thought from Philippians, the second chapter. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in Heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Amen and amen.