

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 26, 2006

Sermon Text: John 18:33-37

Now, you probably feel the same way I do. When someone starts out a story by saying, “You really had to be there,” you wish they’d say, well, just don’t tell it, if you had to be there, I’m not going to get it, so let’s just skip the whole thing.

Well, let me tell you a story anyway. If you had been there, you would have thought it was funny. Another minister, Mike Henderson, and I performed a wedding years ago up in Pennsylvania for a mutual friend. We drove about 14 hours to get there in the middle of St. Mary’s, I think, in the western part of Pennsylvania. I don’t know. I could never find it again. It was in the middle of nowhere. We rolled out of bed after that long night’s drive, and we were just sleepily sitting there on the edges of beds sniffing for coffee, which civilized people have when they invite people 14 hours away to do their wedding. There was no smell of coffee wafting in the air. Nothing! My friend, Mike, through half-open eyes finally asked, “Andy, don’t you have any coffee around here?” Andy said, “No, no, but I can make you some hot tea.” Mike instantly, even half-asleep, had a quick mind, instantly and indignantly said, “Tea! Tea! We fought a war so we wouldn’t have to drink hot tea! We need coffee to get this wedding off the ground!” I think we settled for hot tea.

This is Christ the King Sunday, and we fought a war in this country not to be ruled by a king, and we don’t abide much by the rule of kings in these United States. How is it that we understand Jesus as our King? Now, you may not know that this is also another special Sunday. It’s the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar, the very last Sunday in the Christian year. It’s not an ancient day. It was added in 1925. It’s not like Easter or Christmas from always. It was added in 1925. It was an attempt to advance the message of God as King in Christ over and against the forces of that day, the socialist and fascist forces that were moving across the world through people like Mussolini and Hitler, who were first one and then the other. It’s also a day to repent of our opposition to Christ as our King and to repent of our trust in mere men and women, who always bring one sort of tyranny or another when we hand ourselves over to them. To God, to our God, whose very name is love, we did violence. We were tyrants. We opposed as a people our will. We – when He came offering healing and hope – we nailed Him to a cross.

You know, the Chinese have a saying, “When wrong names are used nothing can be right.” When we call Jesus our King, what do we mean? How can the word “king” encompass for us all that Jesus was and is? How can we think of castles and crowns and thrones all in the same picture and see Jesus as He actually was? A servant, who suffered. The most complete outcast in human form that you can imagine, and yet a king! Born a Jew in occupied land. The legitimacy of His birth was publicly doubted. He championed a cause that no one seemed to understand, and He described a kingdom that no one had imagined. The powers that be felt threatened by His popularity so they plotted to kill Him, and the Roman and the Jewish authorities, and the religious and the governmental authorities, they all hated Him, this unemployed, homeless preacher, and yet a king.

When you think of Christ as King, you must consider what a radical, redefinition Jesus is of everything we’ve ever known to be true. A king, not on a throne, on a cross! Yet, Scripture tells

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us He is above all and will be after all. After all this has passed away, there is Christ the King! After all, when there are no more flags to fight for, when there are no more nations and no more wealth and power to preserve, only Christ, who judges by law those who trust themselves, and judges by grace those who trust Him. We can trust God because God loves us. Not because we are lovable, quite the opposite, a king who steps down as a servant to bring hope to the hopeless and forgiveness to those saddled with guilt. We can trust Him because God loves, because that's the way God is, not because we deserve it.

He brings love and light to those who are wandering and falling and hurting themselves in the dark, and outside of Christ's Kingdom, there is much darkness. Christ is a loving king for sure, but we know that kings make laws, and must judge those who break their laws. What sort of kingdom is it where the king says I command it, love one another, and no one listens! No one listens.

Romans 11:22 reads, “Note then the kindness and the severity of God.” Severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness, otherwise, you too will be cut off. We are called to follow our King, and walk in His ways, and do more than just say with our mouths.

I like this story, which I hope illustrates what I'm trying to say. A new music teacher at a junior high school had just organized a brand new band. There had never been one before. The principal decided the band should give a concert, but the music teacher was not so sure the band was ready. Just before the concert, the music teacher whispered to her nervous musicians. She whispered, “If you're not sure of your part, just pretend to play. Don't play. Just pretend to play.” When the big moment arrived, she brought her baton down with a sweeping flourish, and nothing happened! The band gave a resounding silence!

Imperfectly as we may, we are called to play the music of our King. Having Jesus as our King means opening ourselves up to the pain and the need and the hurt of others, and to bring comfort where we can, and love through our willingness to join them in their troubles. Just as Jesus came to join you and me in ours. To enter our world, even our sin, even our pain, because He loves us that much. Inside of each of us, there is some pain. In fact, there is a battle going on within each of us. Nobody can fight the battle for us. We must fight it ourselves, and it is a battle that we can win because we are children of the King, and He will be with us.

St. Paul speaks of this battle in Romans. He says, “Who will deliver me from the shackles of this body of death? I know what is right in my mind, but that's not what I do, and I know what is wrong, and that's the very thing I end up doing, time after time. Who will deliver me from the shackles of this body of death?” Then he writes, “Oh thank God, He will, through Jesus Christ the anointed one, our Lord, the Kingdom of Christ.”

As citizens who follow our King, we are to care and to share the load, and to cry with and to laugh with and to feel with. God put us here for each other! He came to be with us even though we crowned Him with thorns and enthroned Him on a cross. We are to be here for each other as we struggle together what God in Christ has shown us we should be.

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A bunch of boys was playing King Arthur and the Round Table one summer afternoon as many of you, I'm sure, did. Boys and girls. They had trash can lids for shields. They had pointed sticks as swords. They had old broom handles as spears. They drew swords to see who was who. Most of them were knights. One of them was a dragon. One of them was a damsel in distress, and one lucky boy got to be king. Now, they'd only been playing for about five minutes before the king said they should all leave that dragon alone and go explore up the creek. Well, they kept smacking the little dragon boy with sticks, and he said, "I am King Arthur, and I say we should go see what is up this creek!" By that time, they had the dragon crying, and the little king for a day shouted out, "How can I be king if you won't do what I say?"

How can I be king if you won't do what I say? It's a good question. How can Jesus be our king unless we do what He says? In fact, Jesus asks much the same question. He said why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I say? Jesus can't be our king if we won't do what He says. You know what He said. Love God and love your neighbor.

In his book, The Different Drummer, Scott Peck wrote this. I'll try to bring this point back around to a personal level. He says that God designed us to yearn for open, honest, authentic relationships. He calls these communal relationships, but because we choose false peacekeeping over truth telling, we end up with pseudo-communal relationships, false communal relationships. These are marriages and family relationships or friendships that are strictly surface level. No one says anything unsafe. They never discuss misunderstandings, never reveal hurt feelings, never air frustrations or ask difficult questions. The underlying rule in pseudo-community is don't rock the boat, don't disturb the peace. It's a counterfeit peace. Misunderstandings arise, but they're never resolved. Feelings beg to be shared, but they're not. Offenses occur, but nobody talks about them. Doubts about the other's integrity creep in, but they're never dealt with. In time, such relationships deteriorate. The secret agendas of hurt and misunderstanding lead to detachment and distrust and bitterness. Feelings of love begin to die. It's a story of too many marriages, too many family relationships and friendships. Peck says the only antidote to pseudo-community is truth, which can be chaos, but truth.

Bill Hybels calls it the "tunnel of chaos" where hurts are unburied, hostilities are revealed, put on the table and tough questions are asked. Truth is essential to healthy relationships and to a healthy faith. The truth of the matter is that we need a savior. The truth of the matter is that we are sinners. The truth of the matter is that we have a savior to deal with our sins and our mortality. The truth of the matter is we have a savior in Jesus Christ our King. Jesus said I am the truth. He said I speak the truth. He said the Father and I are one. He said when you have seen me, you have seen the Father. There is very little wiggle room for alternative truths here. Either Jesus is the truth and tells the truth and is Lord of all, or He is not. If He is, then He deserves our full allegiance. That is the question to ponder on Christ the King Sunday. Amen.