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Revelation 1:4b-8; **John 18:33-37**

## THE KING OF LOVE

When you think about it, it is rather ironic that the Christian Church has designated this particular Sunday each year to be “Christ the King Sunday.” After all, as our reading from John’s gospel reveals, Jesus went to great lengths to avoid the title of “king.” When Jesus is arrested and brought in handcuffs before the Roman governor, Pilate repeatedly asks Jesus, “Are you king of the Jews.” And each time, Jesus gives an evasive answer. The closest Jesus comes to admitting he is a king is when he says, “my kingdom is not from this world.” Jesus may have understood himself to be a king, but he knew Pilate would never be able to comprehend the nature of his kingship. In fact, the nature of Jesus’ kingship has eluded lots of people down through the ages, including the Christian Church itself. When Christian artwork has depicted Jesus coming with a sword in hand, when the Christian community has conquered lands, subjugated peoples, killed those with dissenting beliefs, and abused the vulnerable all in Jesus’ name, when it has amassed wealth and earthly powers, it had demonstrated a massive failure to comprehend the kingship of Jesus.

Jesus never sought to imitate earthly kings—those who use coercive power and military might to dominate others, who acquire privileges and wealth for themselves, who elevate themselves above others. Instead, Jesus offers us a radically different image of a king. He rides into Jerusalem not on a grand steed, but rather on a humble donkey. He associates with outcasts, the diseased, and the poor. He himself *is* poor. He owns virtually nothing. And he allows

himself to be vulnerable to the evil forces of this world. Jesus *is* a king, but he is the King of love.

And as the King of love he commands *us* to love. That is what kings do: they give commands. Just a short time before his arrest, Jesus tells his followers: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” And so this king we follow commands us to follow his example of love, generosity, compassion, service, and sacrifice.

Christ the King Sunday offers us the opportunity to assess our lives and to ask ourselves: to whom do I offer my allegiance? Who has ultimate authority in my life? That’s the thing about kings: they reign unopposed. Kings will not tolerate rivals. Their sovereignty is absolute. Jesus may be the King of love but don’t confuse the focus on love with his being indulgent of our tendency to have other loyalties. Jesus demands our sole allegiance to him and his way of love and grace and compassion.

Here in the United States we live in a democracy. And as those living in a democracy, we are accustomed to having *choices*. We get to choose between candidates for our leaders. And if we don’t like them, we get to choose new ones come the next election. But the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ is not grounded on a democracy—although I think we sometimes act as if it were. We sometimes enter the events and circumstances of our lives as if we have a ballot in hand which gives us a choice between candidates. When faced with a person who has wronged us, will we fill in the bubble that says “Jesus Christ” and strive to forgive or will fill in the bubble that says “lingering resentment and anger”? Will we love our enemy or will we choose the other candidate of hatred and prejudice? Will we extend care to the person in need or will we blame them for their misfortune? When the catalogs fill our mailbox, when the ads flash on TV,

when we are bored and turn to internet shopping, which candidate will claim our allegiance: Jesus or materialism?

The way of Jesus is not grounded upon a democracy. We don't get to choose when we follow Jesus (maybe tomorrow but not today) or under what circumstances we will follow Jesus (not in this particular case). The way of Jesus calls for our absolute allegiance to him and his way of mercy, generosity, justice, and compassion.

Of course, following the way of Jesus in this complicated world is not always clear. But at least we should be asking ourselves that question when confronted with challenging and complex circumstances instead of just relying upon our own desires, impulses, or habits. Because if we are not asking that question, some other force, some other power, some other institution, some other person will indeed step in to fill the void and will claim sovereignty over our lives. Maybe that is the institution of the family. Maybe that is our socio-economic status. Maybe that is our political party or the forces of consumerism. Maybe that is simply ourselves and our personal preferences and self-interest. Something for sure will serve as king over our lives and claim our allegiance.

We come to this place of worship to recall who is the Sovereign over our lives. Our lives belong to God. Our commitment belongs to the way of Jesus Christ. Over and against all other loyalties—even the best of human institutions—this is where our sole allegiance lies. And so I invite us to ponder a question: the presence of these two flags hanging here in this house of worship. The American flag and the Christian flag. Should we honor both of these flags and what they represent? Absolutely! Both country and Church can certainly claim some portion of our fidelity and commitments in life. But as Christians our ultimate allegiance is to the way of Jesus Christ above that of country. And as Christians, our ultimate allegiance is to the way of

Jesus Christ above that of the Christian Church or the Presbyterian denomination—and certainly there is a long history of the Christian Church failing to show faithful allegiance to the way of Jesus Christ. So, what does it say that we hang these two flags in this sanctuary of worship to the One who is our only true King and Sovereign, to the One who will not abide a rival?

Jesus is our King—the King of Love. Family does not always uphold that value. Country does not always uphold that value. Church does not always uphold that value. But Jesus does. Love is the tactic Jesus uses to win us over. Love is the power used by Jesus to heal and to transform. Love is how Jesus subverts the kingdoms and powers and authorities that rule our lives and infest our hearts with selfishness, lies, hatred, fear, and anger.

The Roman governor Pilate is anxious in Jesus' presence. He is worried about a rival king, a threat to his power. And so he should be. Because Jesus knows the power that resides in love. Jesus knows that Pilate or Caesar or the latest contemporary strong man or institution of might, will ultimately lose. The writer of the Book of Revelation reminds us that earthly kings and leaders will come and go, but the true king, the true ruler of the world is Jesus. Jesus is referred to as the Alpha and the Omega: the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, meaning that Jesus is the beginning and ending of all things. His reign of love and compassion, of mercy and resurrection, will outlast all earthly authorities.

That offers us a source of hope when all we see around us in this world are powerful people exploiting or hurting the weak. We can find hope in the supremacy of Jesus' kingdom. Jesus' kingdom is a subversive presence in this world.

And then Jesus calls us, you and me, to join his subversive kingdom and his subversive activity. "This is my commandment," he says to us, "that you love one another as I have loved you." It is a call to be part of his subversive kingdom.

Each Sunday we gather here in this sanctuary to engage in political and social subversion. Here we celebrate the values and the way of life that undermine the powers of hate, and greed, and selfishness, the powers of lies and deception and exploitation. Did you realize that is what we are doing every time we pray the Lord's Prayer? It is a terribly subversive prayer for when we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are praying for the dramatic overthrow of all earthly forces that stand in opposition to God's way—all those forces that reside within our own hearts and minds and souls and those forces that exist around us. We pray this prayer for the Sovereign reign of the King of Love to rule our lives and our world.