

Love's Servant is Sovereign
Matthew 25:31-46
Rev. Loren McGrail
Irondequoit United Church of Christ
Reign of Christ Sunday
November 22, 2020



“That which you most need will be found where you least want to look.”
Carl Jung

This Sunday is the last Sunday in Ordinary Time. It is Christ the King Sunday according to the liturgical calendar, though many call it Reign of Christ Sunday now. Did you know that this is a recent addition to the Western liturgical calendar? Pope Pius XI instituted it in 1925 just after WWI. How many of you recall from history what was happening in the world? Let me refresh your memory. As I read off a short survey of events, I invite you to pay attention to the similarities between then and now:

- Benito Mussolini dissolved the Italian parliament
- In Munich Hitler resurrected his political party and published Mein Kampf
- As many as 40,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan paraded in Washington, DC. The Klan had more than 5 million members making it the largest fraternal organization in the United States.
- Teacher John T. Scopes was arrested for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in Tennessee.

- The Spanish flu pandemic had ended just seven years prior.

Pope Pious wanted to refocus Christians on putting Jesus at the center of their lives. By celebrating Christ as our Sovereign, our true king, he hoped to combat the sin of idolatry which he saw gaining momentum. He used the language of empire and kingship to do it. Dear Ones, don't we too have a list of horrors and idolatries reminiscent of 1925?

However, this grafting on of Christ as King language onto what appears as the coda of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is what makes this such a difficult Sunday to preach. Difficult unless we claim the royalty of Jesus in a new way. Jesus is homeless for example. The cover of your bulletin and the image on the PowerPoint shows a sculpture of a homeless man lying on a park bench in front of a cathedral. If you look closely at the statute, at the feet, you can see the nail holes from the cross. This statue has caused a stir all over the world as it has been replicated in many cities often near a church. Once, it is told, a church member complained to the pastor that a homeless man was asleep on a bench in front of the church and couldn't he do something about this as it was "unsightly."

Rev. Fleming Rutledge, Episcopal priest who officiated my marriage service says we also worship "a royalty who stoops." She goes on to say, "The Son who sits upon his glorious throne with all the nations gathered before him is the same one who, at the very apex of his cosmic power, reveals that the universe turns upon a cup of water given to the littlest ones in his name." Jesus is not only the one who serves but also the one most vulnerable: the one who is hungry and thirsty, imprisoned, or sick. This is where we can find him. Christ chooses these places, inhabits these spaces and waits for us to show up. Our sin lies in neglecting to recognize and respond to him where he already is. On top if we haven't recognized the poverty within our own souls, how he dwells there too, it will be hard for us then to see him and serve him in others without being patronizing.

I would like to share some verses from an Improv prayer/poem by Maren Tirabassi. She posted it this week on Facebook, and I think it captures this in situations we can understand or identify with today:

"I was a server with a hungry family,
and, because it was curbside,
you didn't bother to tip."

"I was thirsty for a phone call,
but you scolded me for not figuring
out Zoom and livestream
to take advantage of the church's
wonderful programming."

"I was vulnerable as a naked child,
and you exercised
your (Satan-given) right
not to wear a mask."

"I was a teacher
(you knew from your older child
who had hours of after-school help),
but suddenly I was the stranger
you publicly blamed
for your seven-year-old's

virtual school year.”

“I was in the hospital
and you unfriended me
because, you know, contact tracing.”

“Well, it wasn’t prison,
though it felt that way,
behind my plexiglass shield all day
scanning your purchases,
and you never even said, ‘hello.’”

The ones who were certainly human
said, “When did we see you ...
hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick or in prison?”
And the Storyteller said, That’s the point.”

Dear Ones, it is our actions and relationships which will be judged not our theology, our dogmas, or even beliefs. When we engage with those on the margins, we are not only ministering in his name but to him: “Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.”

To proclaim Jesus as our servant king, our sovereign, means we must dethrone our egos, our plans, fears, and anxiety so we can catch a glimpse of the interconnected beauty and power and vulnerable truth that all has value to God. We are called to bring our hunger, and the hunger of the world to God. We are called to “bring our inner stranger” and the exiled of the world” to him as the poet Bruce Sanguin. “Only then can we open to healing and only then can we “dare to imagine integrity/in our inner life, our relationships, our planet, and our political systems. Only then can we dare, as Sanguin says, to imagine the reign of Christ as Love’s servant.

In a year marked by a global pandemic whose death toll is still rising daily; in a year ripped open by horrendous acts of racism and violence; in a year desecrated by the growing knowledge and fear that our planet is burning up; and finally, in a year that has witnessed our democracy coming apart at the seams; we are called to finish the church year broken open and empty; we are called to get on our knees and worship the one who reigns stooped over someone else’s pain. Why, you ask? So, Dear Ones, once again we can make room for the one who is be born anew in our hearts, the one who will be God -with- us. That’s why.