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Colossians 1:11-20

CHRIST THE KING?

A few weekends ago Kathy and I took our boys on their first camping trip. We went with the Cub Scouts group to a Scout camp near Anadarko. On Saturday the boys had back-to-back activities and some of them were less than captivating to me, so I wandered back to the campsite where a few of the dads had gathered to "tend the fires". Apparently it takes 4 or 5 grown men to watch a fire burn and make sure it doesn't somehow explode. Anyway, all of the guys except for me had served in the military. One guy was a Navy vet and another from the Army and they quickly found out that some of the terminology was different.

Finally another guy, who had been a Marine said, "Yeah it really depends on which branch you are in". For instance, if you told Navy personnel to "secure a building," they would turn off the lights and lock the doors. Army personnel would occupy the building so no one could enter. Marines would assault the building, capture it, and defend it with suppressive fire and close combat. The Air Force, on the other hand, would take out a three-year lease with an option to buy.

Language really does matter. Words matter. But words are symbolic, they only generate the power we place into them, and they can mean different things depending on your context. For instance, as a person pretty deeply involved in church and the planning of worship, the word "advent" means something to me. It brings to mind a sense of anticipation...I hear the echoes of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" in my ears and see the bright light of candles in my mind's eye when I hear that word. Other people may not even know what it means, or that we are entering the season of advent in the Christian calendar. In fact, many may not know that there is a Christian calendar. This Sunday marks our new year's eve as we prepare to usher in the new year that Advent welcomes. Perhaps it is another way that the church has too closely merged with culture.

I believe that the job of the church in the 21st century must be about confronting and resisting the pull of culture in ways that are based on love and compassion. So, in our context, this means resisting consumerism, developing a

small carbon footprint and living out community that is a true alternative to what we are being sold. And that takes effort that I see played out in three ways. First, it is our job to make the church reflect the life and teachings of Jesus and that means a sense of inclusion that is genuine, open-armed and generous. Second I think that it is the church's job to be about the work of social justice – seeking the Reign of God in the here and now and being a voice for the "least of these". But there is a third thing. I believe that the church has to be a voice of interpretation, one that opens the Biblical witness up to a people far removed from its original context...finding and illuminating the humanity that is present in our texts and still applies today and being critical of the ways that our humanity has mixed with the divine message being imparted to reflect brokenness and bigotry. It is our job, in this third category, to be critical thinkers and to make the text as real as possible. It is not our job to defend theology, for theology is talk about God, it isn't God. Our job is to make the words and symbols effective enough to allow people to experience God through them. That's why language matters so much to me. It is why I use non-gendered terms for God most of the time and why I look at the language of the Lord's Prayer that we say each week and why I try very hard to insure that you hear words from this pulpit and from the hymnal that are intentional. Words matter.

Primarily known for his work in business organization and transformational dialogue, Werner Erhard has many times made the audacious claim that all transformation is linguistic. Of course he allows that context is decisive in such matters, but that the way we create an alternative future is through shifts in language. He advises against using things like "purpose" or "goals" and talks instead about the power of possibility. Possibility, he says, is a declaration of what we create in the world each time we show up. For example, he continues, peace may not reign at this moment, but the possibility of peace does enter the room just because we have walked in the door.

That is a captivating idea to me, one that almost haunts me as I think about a variety of aspects in my life. Then there are Sundays like this one. There's a lot going on. This is the Sunday before Thanksgiving and also the end of the church year – what is called Christ the King Sunday, or in the more progressive communities called Reign of Christ Sunday. What should I preach on? And in the midst of those things there is my choice of texts from the Lectionary. I didn't really like any of them. Usually there's one gem, but this Sunday...ughh. My safety net is typically the gospel passage, but today it is from Luke and is the story of Jesus' betrayal, mock trial and death on the cross. Happy Thanksgiving. So I decided, what the heck...instead of running away from this Colossians passage that I don't like I'll preach against it.

And then something happened.

You know, I have never really liked this letter because it pulls me places I don't

want to go. This is supposedly a letter from Paul but the vast majority of scholars don't think that he wrote it. Why? Well, the language is different, but more importantly this author suggests a couple of things that seem to contradict Paul – the primary one is that Christ operates as the ruler of the church, the head of the body as the text says. The author also says that through Christ there is "forgiveness of sins" but Paul's language is that in Christ there is freedom from sin, always defined as a power and in singular terminology. So because of the syntax and theological differences between this letter and other ones from Paul (as well as a lot of other factors), most scholars date this post-Pauline letter to sometime after the late 60s of the first century, perhaps later.

But there is something else. Despite this coming from some community post Paul that shares some of his ideas but significantly alters others, like the role of women for instance, this community is still standing to the side of the Roman Empire. When it uses "head of the church" language it is standing against the rule of Caesar. That's the origin of the language. But 4 centuries later, this language would be reshaped in light of the church and the empire uniting under the rule of Constantine. After that point, the language of Christ as King shifted from standing against the empire to reinforcing it. And that's where we pick it up. One of the best ways to see this is through art.

Prior to the 4th century we have no examples of portraits of Jesus, at least the upper-torso and head shot that we call portraits – and NO depictions of a dead Jesus hanging on the cross...so no crucifixes. The dominant images in the first couple of centuries are Jesus as shepherd and the powerful image of the woman praying with her hands open, arms spread – often called the Oran. Maybe you have seen a famous part of the later Christian art, usually in icon form, of Jesus as "Christ the Pantokrator", which is a compound Greek word from the words for "all" and "strength" and is usually translated as "all-powerful" or "Almighty". The picture is usually a very close up portrait of Jesus with a high, arching, typically golden halo around his head. In his left hand he holds a book, often very ornately decorated, and his right hand is usually making the gesture of blessing – two fingers extended and the other three connected at the fingertips. This image was prevalent in the 6th and 7th centuries and remains pivotal in Eastern Orthodox art. It is the image of a king – but not one holding a sword or a scepter...Jesus holds the record of the church, the gospel story, and raises his hand not in the sign of victory but of blessing. This is, in art language, a transformation...this is the vision of possibility.

The term "Pantokrator" was used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible to translate El Shaddai, or the name for God that in English gets translated as "Almighty". So the images of Jesus as Pantokrator reflect a shift in the late 5th century in his status. The doctrine of the Trinity was being formed and the idea that "Almighty" could refer to Jesus as well as God was beginning to be expressed. Soon, Jesus and God would be mostly synonymous terms, though with the careful caveat than Jesus was of the same substance, but not equal to God. And thus began a

theological song and dance that has worked out about as well as "separate but equal" works in school systems.

So, why does this matter at all? Well, we're back to job #3 of the church in the 21st century. If we were to just let the liturgy of the church play itself out on "Christ the King" Sunday you would get an earful of king language attached to Jesus. Now, maybe that makes sense when the primary theological argument is that Jesus is "almighty" like God is "almighty" and when the church and state are merging into an oligarchy. But how does calling Christ "king" make any sense to us now? In all places in these colonies that rebelled from England, that rejected the very notion of a king, we should be at least confused if not offended at the metaphor. There are people in this country who don't even want representational government to do anything more than build roads and provide defense. What does the image of a king who dictates all matters to you mean to our colonial, independent, "American" ethos?

Well, I'd like to say that I have a neat trick to massage the imagery. But I've got nothing for King. Really. Oh, I guess that we could over-spiritualize it by making it a metaphorical king or saying that Jesus is the king of the church, the head of the body of Christ, as this author claims. But I don't buy that either. I rather like Paul's model in which all are equal in the body - whether slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female.

And that's where this text began to turn for me.

How many of us studied Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in high school or college? As an English major I had to read quite a bit of it. I studied it for its language, its syntax and the flow of the poetic form which Chaucer didn't invent but surely popularized. I read the characters in light of their flow in the poetic form. We read it with microscopes, analyzing each detail and researching the imagery and metaphors.

But when Canterbury Tales was written and first read, it was being read as social commentary. Chaucer was the satirist of his age, the Jon Stewart of the 14th century. And people didn't read the Tales for the syntax or a deep analysis of the characters, they read it because it spoke to their lives and was addressing things that they were going through right then. That doesn't make Chaucer's work inert in our day and age - there are still PhD's who work their whole lives on his words. It just means that there is a context for art, and that context shapes the art. The remarkable things about art is that when it is really good it transcends its context.

The people to whom this letter was written knew what a ruler with absolute power was, and the people who developed the Christ as Pantokrator image definitely knew what a king with complete power was too. What is remarkable is that they chose to use this imagery for their experience of Christ. But there is a wrinkle that gets left off the statement Christ is King far too often. It is the implied second part of that statement. Christ is King, which means that Caesar or Constantine or

Charlemagne or the Pope or Henry isn't. They experienced the power of Christ and likened it to the only other display of power that they knew – that of the dominating state. But, they believed, Christ's power stood beyond that of the state.

That is where I think that the strand of what Jesus taught remains amidst the centuries of theological construction that has faded its effect. In the 2nd century CE, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon, a powerful presence in the developing church was saying things like: "The Church has been planted as paradise in this world". So how do we get from that to the church being merely the check-in station for your trip to heaven? Somehow we must reclaim this language – even the stuff we can't immediately see a use for.

In Jesus Christ, as the text says, we see the God who cannot be seen. This wasn't written by people who knew Jesus or claim to have seen Christ. It is written by a community that seems to experience Christ in the way that they live and they experience that is more powerful than the mightiest imperial ruler. In Jesus, we see a glimpse of this thing that we call God...this thing that remains elusive but entrancing, invisible but inspiring, mysterious but meaningful. The deeper meaning of Christianity is that we are engaged in possibility and that part of our transformation of our world and future will come by our reclaiming some of this transformative language. Maybe "Christ as King" is not a meaningful thing for us anymore, but what about Christ as a redefinition of power? The strength of armies overshadowed by the power of love...The might of economic control mediated by the act of generosity and sharing...the weight of oppression lifted by the intentionality of solidarity.

In Christ, this text says, "...all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe – people and things, animals and atoms – get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies..." That is a possibility worth looking into. What happens to the rooms we walk into with that in our hearts?

There is room to be grateful for everything in our tradition. Even the most God-awful histories, and we have them, give us a chance to see where we don't want to go. And at this time of great gratitude, I want to even thank this author of Colossians, who I used to want nothing to do with. And though I can hardly believe I am saying this at times, my study and prayer has led me to a place where, as a progressive Christian, I can even embrace Reign of Christ Sunday, with this linguistic transformation...in the words of John Dominic Crossan:

"The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen soon, violently, or literally. The Second Coming of Christ is what will happen when we Christians finally accept that the First Coming was the Only Coming and start to cooperate with its divine presence."

In other words, on Reign of Christ Sunday, we are invited to remember that the “Kingdom of God” or “Reign of God” — to which Jesus constantly pointed — is as fully available now and always as it was 2,000 years ago, it is the possibility that we carry with us into every room we go, and that how we talk about what rules our lives really does matter. The question that remains each Reign of Christ Sunday is whether we will choose to live as if the one who reigns is not Caesar, but God.

And that possibility is something to be thankful for.
AMEN.



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