

Digging Beneath the Language and Images

Christ the King Sunday

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 John 18:33-37
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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November 25, 2018

Being a progressive Christian takes a lot of work. And this particular Sunday on the liturgical church calendar is an excellent case in point. Today is the last Sunday of the Season of Pentecost, the last Sunday of the liturgical church year. We begin a new liturgical year next Sunday with the First Sunday of Advent. But today is always designated as Christ the King Sunday, or in an only slightly less monarchical term, the Reign of Christ Sunday. And therein lies the problem for those of us who identify on the progressive end on the theological spectrum. **Many of us struggle with the language of "king" and "kingdom." Do you? If not, that's fine. But for some it creates a stumbling block to seeing God. Male. Dominating. Subjugating. Hierarchical.**

Did you cringe a little; or perhaps a lot, when hearing the Old Testament Reading from the book of Daniel? The metaphorical language used by the prophet to describe God has influenced the overriding image of God to this very day. "As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool" (Dan. 7:9). Using this language, God is depicted as a cosmic monarch, and all that comes with that image. Even in popular culture today, shows like *The Simpsons* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* depict God this way, albeit sarcastically.

We humans have a destructive tendency of taking language that was meant to be metaphorical in nature and turning it literal, engraving it in granite. To question God's hierarchical maleness is still heresy for what I would suspect may be a majority of Christians. Delwin Brown, author of *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious*, counters, "**Progressive Christianity seeks to unmask and reject the repressive view of God that has infected so much of Christianity.**" He goes on to explain, however, "The development of belief in a monarchical God is understandable.

It emerged in the ancient world when powerful rulers rose up to unify peoples, create laws, impose order, and (ostensibly) protect their subjects from outside threats, natural and human. The power of the monarch came to be viewed as the source of these good things and thus itself the epitome of what is good. The greater the power, it would have seemed, the greater the good, and, if so, then absolute power would equate to absolute good.

Of course, in time it became apparent that no human ruler is absolutely good, and thus none is entitled to absolute power. Even so, the equation of absolute goodness and absolute power could still be made, if now it were ascribed to a divine ruler. The equation was made – God is absolute good, and so absolutely powerful.

-We have been stuck with king and kingdom language ever since. Then again, democracy is still a relatively new thing. Jill Duffield, the editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, formulates why this language is so difficult for progressives. She writes, "These are adjectives akin to anathema in our postmodern, 'MeToo', pluralistic culture." She continues with something what really struck a cord with me, as it took me back to my college years. Remember the movie "Monty Python and the Holy Grail"? In one scene, a person standing in front of a large crowd declares, "I am your king." To which a peasant responds, "Well, I didn't vote for you." "You don't vote for kings," replies the king. And do you remember the common response when playing games with others as a kid and someone become bossy and tries to take over? "Who died and made you king?" Does birthright or bossiness give someone the authority and right to declare themselves king or queen?

Given our repulsion of monarchical expressions of power, we return to our dilemma, **what do we do with Christ the King Sunday?** Jill Duffield asks, "How do we wrestle with such authority in our cultural season of anti-institutionalism and conspiracy theories? How do we talk about obedience, or fear of the Lord, or reign of God, or the King of kings?" One way, of course, especially popular among progressives, is to **stop using hierarchal and patriarchal language altogether**. For the most part that is what we try to do. That is why you will often hear the term **"kingdom" substituted with "kin-dom"**. This is a much more grass-roots and relational term. Yet, a legitimate question remains: What is gained and what is lost when we use "kin-dom" rather than "kingdom"? I encourage us to have that discussion.

Also, it helps to do the often-hard work of **digging beneath the biblical and tradition language and images used for God, and for Jesus as the Risen Christ**. More questions need to be asked. Like, what were the biblical authors trying to reveal about the nature and character of God, and as is the focus on this particular Sunday, of Jesus as the King of kings? From their historical perspective, **biblical authors in New Testament times were trying to contrast the type of divine kingship that Jesus represented from earthly kings** – especially compared to the Roman emperor, who originally carried the title of lord and savior. **To profess Christ as King was a political statement to declare that neither Caesar nor any other human ruler was the ultimate authority that could direct you in how to live your life.**

"Like so many other words, concepts and institutions," writes Jill Duffield, "the model of Jesus reframes, redefines, reforms and restores this one." Jesus' crown was made of thorns, not gold. He did not lord it over others like earthly rulers, but instead came to serve, and to call others to follow his example. When we serve others, therefore, we are serving the Divine, the Sacred, what we call God, and as Christians, Christ. And our service, like Jesus', is to be that of love and compassion. That's the power we wield.

We are called to do this not just as individuals, but as a community. We call that community the Body of Christ, the Church, of which Christ is the head. Then, we expand that to include the Interfaith community of different faith traditions.

Jesus' form of kingship is something completely new. As recorded by the author of the Gospel of John, Jesus declared to Pilate at his trial, "My kingdom is not from this world." Authors of a recent commentary for this Sunday, part of the SALT Project, called "True Power," write,

What Jesus had in mind – in sharp contrast to Pilate – is a “kingdom” without a king, not an empire but rather a community of witnesses, testifying with words and deeds to the truth of God's love.

Is Christ the King? In a sense, insofar as no earthly royalty, no earthly power surpasses the God of love, justice, and grace...But at the same time, in another sense, no, insofar as Jesus clearly declines to take up the royal scepter... when the crowds want to take Jesus by force and make him king.

Jesus has in mind a very different form of power: not the brute, top-down power of a tyrant, the power of Pilate, but instead the true, bottom-up power of love and grace, the power of God. **What is true power? The power that takes the form not of a supreme monarch [or a self-absorbed president], but of a humble servant, a witness to the truth** [of God's love]... In other words, the power that takes the very idea of monarchy and turns it inside out. It's this power – true power – that Jesus comes to embody and declare.

So yes, that's why we still have something called Christ the King, or Reign of Christ, Sunday. But I won't deny it, it still takes a lot of conscious effort on the part of us who identify as progressives to dig beneath the language and images that have often done more harm than good. That is why we are among those engaged in **an effort to reclaim, perhaps even** redefine, traditional Christian concepts. Or, as I personally like to call it, run it through my own filters. I encourage you to do the same. Why? Because we still can't completely get away from all that language and images that we now find disturbing and harmful – at least not as Presbyterians.

Case in point, just try finding a hymn in our hymnal associated with the reign of Christ without having to sing the word, “king.” You may have noticed that our Hymn of Response after this sermon is an interesting choice. Traditionally a Christmas hymn, *Joy to the World* is put to a different tune and included in this section of our hymnal, as well as in the usual Birth of Jesus section. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.”

So, as we sing today's hymns, and listen to an number of scripture passages, instead of rejecting the language and images altogether, simply run them through whatever filter is necessary for you to reclaim meaning for your own journey of faith. And next week, we will begin our journey through the Season of Advent.

Amen.

Resources:

Jill Duffield, “The Language of ‘king’ perplexes and confounds”; *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Nov. 19, 2018
 “True Power: SALT’S Lectionary Commentary for Reign of Christ the King Sunday,” November 20, 2018