

WHAT KIND OF KING?

Luke 23:32-43

November 23, 2025

Last Sunday, Reverend Chris Henry reminded us just how strange we all are. A community of faith built around three simple words: "Jesus is Lord," the earliest Christian confession, not just a statement of faith but a political statement. "Jesus is Lord," a world-changing confession that in its time stood in opposition to the self- and society-proclaimed lordship of Caesar, and in our time stands against all who would seek to solicit our loyalty or our worship. "Jesus is Lord."

It's the message at the heart of Christ the King Sunday. It's no accident that it is the final Sunday of the Christian year; its placement reinforces the message. In the vast and wandering story of God's action in our world – the story of creation and mystery, darkness and light, hiddenness and revealing, sin and redemption, exile and homecoming, death and resurrection – this is where the story ends: Jesus is Lord. The One who has overcome death reigns over all, higher and more magnificent than any earthly kingdom or power.

But like a parable that confounds us with a new layer of meaning just when we think we've got it figured out, if we are going to say Christ is king, we must immediately recognize that he is a peculiar sort of king. Kings rule with force and power. Kings wear jewelry and finery. They are removed from their people, only associating with others of royalty and nobility.

Not this king. There is no royal splendor in this scene from Luke's gospel, only cruelty and pain. Jesus is crucified at the hands of religious and political leaders and in the company of criminals, taunted by those around him as they cast lots for his clothing. They mock and jeer at him; *Save yourself!* they say.

New Testament scholar NT Wright captures the sad irony of the moment. He writes,

Here comes his royal cupbearer, only it's a Roman soldier offering him the sour wine that poor people drank. Here is his royal placard, announcing his kingship to the world, but it is in fact the criminal charge that explains his cruel death (211).

What kind of king would endure such suffering and humiliation? Surely the Messiah, the chosen one, could save himself!

It's true. What they're saying is true, and this is the heart of the matter. Jesus could be anywhere and he is here on the cross, in the company of criminals. He could save himself and rain down vengeance - and instead, he surveys the scene and speaks words of forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He receives the earnest plea of one of the criminals: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." In return, Jesus speaks words of hope and promise: "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus is dying as he lived, associating with the lowly and the undeserving, and enacting God's reign of grace and mercy even from the cross. He did not save himself. He stayed with us. This changes everything.

Bryan Stephenson has written and spoken widely about the power of proximity. You've heard his name invoked from this pulpit a few times. Proximity is this idea that when we get close to one another – close enough to know each other's stories, close enough to be touched by another's suffering – that's when we can break through narratives of anger and fear. That's when mercy can shine through.

Jesus chooses proximity. It's what makes him so confounding as a king. Next Sunday we'll begin the season of Advent. Proximity is at the heart of Christmas, the good news that the "Word became flesh and lived among us." But here on Christ the King Sunday, we stand on the edge of the end and the beginning - the end of Jesus' life, the fullness of his reign in God's story of salvation, and preparing to re-tell the story from the beginning, starting with the incarnation - and we remember that the incarnation of God isn't just about a baby born in a manger. It's about a God who moves toward the suffering all throughout Jesus' life, teaching, healing, seeking out the lost and the least. It's about a Messiah who chooses to die among us, shoulder to shoulder with criminals and under the mockery of those who crucified him.

Our God is a proximate God. Not just up to a certain point, but to the depths of human suffering and pain - even death. In enduring the worst, Jesus shows us that there is truly no suffering where God is not present. No wrong that cannot be forgiven, no harm that cannot be healed.

Some of you are there right now: On a journey of uncertainty and pain. Wrestling with a diagnosis, the dying of a dream, or the future as you imagined it. Know how deeply I believe this: our God is a proximate God. Whatever that pain is, Christ is with you there.

And we see Christ's power at work whenever we dare to get close to one another. On some level, I think that's why we avoid proximity. We know that it will change us.

Bryan Stephenson tells a story about making a visit to a prison to meet with a client for the first time. He pulls into the parking lot and immediately spots a truck that is clearly meant to stand out. It's covered with confederate flags and bumper stickers with offensive white supremacist slogans. Stephenson enters the prison and encounters a guard, a big white man, who is as rude and threatening as can be,

forcing Stephenson, a black lawyer, to undergo a strip search, which was not usual practice for a lawyer visiting a client. And after all this, the guard made a point of telling Stephenson that the truck in the parking lot was his.

This upsetting encounter finally ended, and Stephenson was able to visit with the client, a young black man who was dealing with severe mental illness. The client's first question for Stephenson was, "did you bring me a chocolate milkshake?" Stephenson patiently explained "no, I'm your lawyer, I'm here to help you" but because the young man was so fixated on the milkshake, Stephenson finally offered, "listen, next time I come, if they'll let me, I'll bring you a chocolate milkshake." He was never allowed to bring it, and eventually it was time to go to court. It just so happened that that hostile guard, the one with the truck, was the one who brought the client to court that day. He was in the courtroom, which means he heard the testimony that was presented over three days: Stephenson's client had been in 29 foster homes by the time he was 10 years old. He started using drugs as a teenager in an attempt to deal with untreated schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychosis. He committed a horrible crime in the midst of one of those psychotic episodes.

The next time that Stephenson went to visit his client in prison, the guard was there, and it was like he was completely changed. No more humiliating searches or rude treatment. He addressed the lawyer, now "Mr. Stephenson" with respect, and as he walked him to the door of the visitation area, he shared that he had been in the courtroom that day and said, "I just need to tell you that I think that what you are doing is a good thing." He said, "I realize that I'm a very angry person. I didn't think that anybody had it worse than I've had it - but listening to the evidence in that case, I realized that your client has had it worse than me. I just want you to know that I think you're doing a good thing, and I want to shake your hand."

"And one more thing. On the way back from the courthouse to the prison, I took an exit and I took your client to a Wendy's and bought him a chocolate milkshake."

Proximity changes us. Proximity is the transformative power of God's love at work on the cross and in our daily lives.

This is the king we worship. A king on a cross. A God who chooses us, born in a manger, eating with sinners, healing the sick, dying next to criminals. This is our king, and we make his presence known, we make his reign visible any time we listen to the story of another. Anytime we allow ourselves to be inconvenienced or uncomfortable for the sake of another. In peculiar acts; giving up what appears to be ours: our time, our resources. Anytime we extend grace and mercy to those to whom it has been denied. Whenever we sit with or serve the suffering or allow someone to sit with or serve us in our suffering. These are the holy moments of proximity, where the crucified one continues to meet us; where the words of forgiveness and mercy spoken by Jesus on the cross continue to bear fruit in our lives.

These moments will change us. Christ, who reigns on high, will meet us there. Thanks be to God. Amen.