

Date: November 20, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Reign of Christ

**SERMON: Feeding the Flock With Justice**

Text(s): Ezekiel 34:1-11, 16-20; Mark 13:24-36

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For some of us, today is the Sunday after our Halls of Holly fair, when those who worked so hard take a well-deserved rest. For others, it's the beginning of a very busy week as we prepare to celebrate our annual Thanksgiving holiday.

On the larger church calendar, however, including our own United Church of Christ, today is the Sunday that we used to call "The Feast of Christ the King," but which we now call "the Feast of the Reign of Christ." Kings, it seems, are out of fashion in church circles, both because of the masculine gender issues they raise, and because of our aversion to kings in general.

However, just a few weeks from now, we'll be lifting our voices in song with our favorite Christmas carols. One of them, undoubtedly will be "Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king," which we'll sing with our usual gusto, our feelings about kings notwithstanding. Even when it's not Christmas, many of our traditional hymns hail Jesus as King. One of my favorites as a child was "Lead On, O King Eternal" because we kids always took great of pleasure in rendering it as "Lead On O Kinky Turtle".

While the descriptions of God or Jesus as king may be troubling to some, including me, because of their exclusively masculine imagery, I think there is a deeper issue than gender inclusiveness here that we need to think seriously about, and that is our ascribing to Christ the sort of power and glory associated with our image of kings.

I've always found it interesting that Christians began hailing Jesus as a king almost from the get-go. Handel didn't get his inspiration for the Hallelujah chorus in his *Messiah* from nowhere, but from the New

Testament itself where Jesus is described as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Yet there's no suggestion in any of the stories of Jesus or any of the sayings attributed to him in the gospels where he appears to have claimed this image or title for himself. In fact, in the only place where this question is directly asked of Jesus, is in the story of his trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Jesus was on trial because his opponents had accused him of proclaiming himself a king, and therefore a rival to Caesar. So Pilate asks him directly, "Are you a king?" And Jesus' replies, "So you say."

In Florence, Italy, just in front of the Duomo stands an octagonal shaped smaller building that is the baptistry; I'm sure some of you have seen it. On the ceiling of that baptistry is a magnificent mosaic in the Byzantine style, depicting Christ as the *pantocrator*, the cosmic emperor of the universe. Christ sits enthroned against a glittering gold backdrop, surrounded by apostles and saints, benignly ruling over the world. He is no longer the crucified Jew, broken by the power of imperial Rome; he has swallowed up the Roman emperor and taken his place, with all the glittering trappings of imperial glory.

Do we humans have some deep-rooted need for kings, for someone to acknowledge as our sovereign on whom we confer power? Why else have we always had them, even in modern democracies? And we do have them, even if we call them presidents or prime ministers. This inclination to be ruled by powerful sovereigns also carries over into religion; all over the world, people imagine the deity as a kind of super-ruler, a king of kings. And it appears to have always been so. I guess it's that fact, that troubles me particularly. For it's abundantly clear that the impact of the image of Christ as a king has rarely ever brought out the best in Christ's followers. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the assimilation of Jesus into the Roman imperial image has led to most of the wrong turns and outright crimes, including genocide, that have been committed in Jesus' name by his

followers down through the centuries. It seems to me that when a religion imagines God as an emperor, it's always in danger of acting like the emperor, which is to say, acting like an unjust and arbitrary tyrant, for that is what emperors have invariably proven to be.

This language of empire, theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests, underlies the fundamental competitiveness and success-orientation of contemporary Western culture. The materialism and violence in our culture that simultaneously frightens and fascinates us are the products of this underlying social language of imperial power and glory. The way we assign worth to people in monetary terms, the way we nearly deify those who gain great wealth testifies to the truth of Brueggemann's analysis. Our movies and TV programs reflect our fascination with violence, which is the handmaid of materialism, though that Hollywood violence on the screen effectively numbs our sensibilities to the real-world violence we both suffer and inflict on others. Which may explain why we will pay money to see Mel Gibson's gore-filled movie *The Passion of the Christ*, or the non-stop *CSI* or *Law and Order* shows, but turn off the TV so we don't have to watch newsclips of starving victims of genocide in the Sudan or hear news reports of our torture of detainees in secret prison camps.

Both of our lessons this morning, which are set in our Common Lectionary as the texts for this particular liturgical feast day, introduce us to a very different notion of sovereignty than that of Christ dressed in the emperor's clothes. In Ezekiel's prophetic vision, God is acknowledged as Israel's true sovereign. Yet, in this passage we hear God's indictments of Israel's earthly kings for their rapacious and unjust behavior. God reminds them that a real ruler is a shepherd, whose task is to feed the flock, not feed on them. God says, "*I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen*

*the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.*" The people will know that God's sovereignty is the real thing because of the way God acts. "*And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those that have enslaved them.*" Earthly rulers put heavy yokes on their people; God breaks the yoke. The marks of God's sovereignty are nurturing care for the weak and the victims, a passionate commitment to justice, and the liberation of those who are oppressed and downtrodden. God's self-description is not that of a tyrant-king who lords it over his subjects, but that of a Shepherd who feeds the flock with justice.

St. Matthew continues to overturn our usual notions of royal power in his dramatic portrayal of Christ as the Ultimate Ruler and Judge of the earth. This sovereign Christ separates the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. At first, his description leads us to envision that imperial Christ on the ceiling of the Florence baptistry. "*When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*" Sounds like an imperialistic description of any king or emperor, doesn't it?

But as we listen in to the judgment that this emperor renders, we discover that Matthew's understanding of that royal power and authority is fundamentally the same as Ezekiel's.

This royal Christ surprises both the righteous and the unrighteous his verdict. To the righteous, Christ says, "*Come, you blessed, inherit the kingdom which has been prepared for you. When I was hungry, you fed me; when I was naked you clothed me; when I was sick and in prison, you visited me; when I was an immigrant alien, you welcomed me.*" This is hardly the picture or the judgment we expected.

A king who is hungry? A king who is naked? A king who is a prisoner? A king who is an immigrant alien? What's going on here? What kind of world is this? The unrighteous are judged by the same criteria, except in reverse. They have failed to feed or clothe or welcome their king.

Another surprise in the story is that both the sheep and the goats are astonished at the verdict. Neither could recall having seen their lord hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or in prison. Both ask the same question: "*Lord, when did we see you hungry or sick or imprisoned or an alien?*" The answer to both is identical. It is at once the simplest and the most terrifying of answers. It is so simple a child could not misunderstand it. It is terrifying because it is so easy to miss it and so painful to hear. The righteous and the wicked are not distinguished from one another, not on the doctrinal correctness of their religious beliefs. Judgment is not rendered on the basis of a balance sheet of pluses and minuses, or a spreadsheet of sins, mortal or venial. This royal judge is not Santa Claus, who's

*"making his list and checking it twice,  
Gonna find out who's naughty or nice."*

The simple part of the verdict is that they are judged on how they have personally treated their king. The terrifying part is that the king was hidden in the face of their poor or weak neighbor who needed their help, and so it is how they treated their neighbor that either saves or dooms them.

There is no suggestion that the goats were more wicked than the sheep in the way we ordinarily think of wickedness. They weren't scheming how to murder or steal or ruin someone's reputation. They simply ignored the needs of their neighbors. When hunger appeared on their TV screens, they turned off the TV so that they wouldn't have to think about it or do anything about it. The only time they thought about prisoners was when they voted for

a politician who promised to get tough on crime and protect them from violent by voting for capital punishment. If they took notice of the excluded and marginalized at all, it was to thank God that they were more fortunate. What the condemned in this story failed to see was that in the face of the hungry, the destitute, the lonely, in the face of the immigrant alien, they were, in fact, looking into the face of their sovereign. They didn't recognize their lord in the poor, the powerless, the excluded, because they were too busy shoring up their own lives and surrounding themselves with the trappings of earthly security and status, climbing the ladder, and looking out for Number One. And that is not the way to hell; it is hell.

The righteous didn't recognize Christ either; but for a different reason. They didn't see Christ because they were too busy seeing their neighbors and responding to them. They saw hungry people and tried to feed them. They saw people excluded or marginalized and reached out to include them. They weren't inordinately preoccupied with their own needs but occupied with meeting the needs of others. They didn't know it was Christ they were helping, because their own love and charity was hidden from them as well. They were not self-consciously being charitable, you see; they simply responded to the needs they saw in front of their eyes. And in so doing, they are surprised to discover that in serving others they have, in fact, been serving their sovereign lord, hidden in the faces of the poor. And such a life of unselfish service and compassion is not the way to heaven. It is heaven. It is the kingdom of God.

The reason this story is such a terrifying one, for me at least, is that it continually confronts me with a question I really don't want to be asked all the time. Which world do I want to live in? A world where the CEO of Walmart gets a salary of \$22,000,000 a year while the people who work in his stores are below the poverty line and get no health care unless it's

paid for by the taxpayers? A world where there's a great deal of news coverage of an arrogant football player with a \$49 million dollar contract who gets fired because he can't play nicely with the other children on the playground, but it took a devastating hurricane to get the media's attention and finally acquaint us with the deeply entrenched systemic poverty and racism in New Orleans and Mississippi?

For it's clear to me from this story, that the world we choose is the world we get. If we choose a hellish world of poverty and inequality and greed, that's the world we get— a world in which we never see Christ in the faces of our poor neighbors, and so never hear Christ's words, "*Come you blessed, inherit the kingdom.*" Or we can choose the world where children don't have to go to bed hungry, where health care is a basic human right, where we feed our neighbors with justice, and in so doing, discover our own true blessedness.