

# “From Christ to Church and Back Again”

---

**John Wilkinson**

**Third Presbyterian Church**

**November 23, 2014 Christ the King Sunday**

**Ephesians 1:15-23 and Matthew 25:31-46**

On behalf of the Stewardship Committee, thank you to those of you who have responded already to the “Invitation to Give.” You will see numbers listed in the bulletin; already when we print the bulletin on Thursday the numbers are out of date, which is good. Nonetheless, we are pleased with the initial response. So thank you. If you have not yet returned your pledge card, or sent your pledge via email to Carol Foster, do it soon. It helps us immensely in our budget planning for 2015.

As you know, we have mentioned the need to increase our overall, congregational wide giving by about \$100,000, and it is clear that that message has been heard. So thank you for your prayerful consideration.

I was privileged this week to preach in the chapel service at our Presbyterian seminary in Austin, Texas. The temperature was in the 60’s, which isn’t important to mention – OK, maybe a little important. After the service, I had lunch with about a dozen students, mostly a Presbyterian group. We talked a lot about the future of our denominational family. They know that things are changing and evolving. They were a thoughtful, lively group.

I thought two things at that lunch that have to do with our stewardship efforts here. One is that this Presbyterian tradition of ours is worth sustaining. How we engage the Bible, how we engage the world, how we build community, how we respond to God’s call in our lives is not necessarily better than other traditions, of course, but it is unique in the Christian constellation, and if it were to disappear, something important would disappear with it.

And secondly, the particular outpost of that enterprise called Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York is making contributions all over the place. It was fun for me to be able to talk to students about what we do here – worship and education and mission. They were interested.

Link how we matter to a group of students in an altogether different part of the country with how we link to this community and how we link to one another and you will know that every dollar you pledge matters, now and into the future. So, again, thank you for the responses that already have come in and those yet to be returned.

Today’s in a conversation unabashedly about Jesus. Any conversation is that, but this is as overt as it gets. Not to get too liturgical on us, but today is called Christ the King Sunday. Some are

beginning to call it the Reign of Christ Sunday, to de-emphasize Christ's regal and royal status while not underplaying his lordship. Either way for me, so it's Christ the King Sunday.

Today is, in fact, the last Sunday of our liturgical year. Advent begins next Sunday, hard to believe, though Christmas decorations and music are everywhere already. Christ the King Sunday serves as a kind of transition point between what has been and what will be. Some years we emphasize it more than others, always, of course, seeking to nod toward Thanksgiving as well, which falls in this same window.

If you want to understand the theological argument for all this, listen again to a portion of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church that we just heard. "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

Here we are to understand, Beverly Gaventa reminds us, that God's actions in Jesus Christ deserve our praise. More than that, they give us hope and empower the church. (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, pages 313-315) Jesus' life, death and resurrection is not random; it is God working in the world, working in the universe, working in our lives, working in the church. We do not stand alone; we do not operate autonomously. Because of Christ, we have power; our ministry is grounded in the power of the risen Christ. Gaventa writes that "The church may act with confidence, because it knows itself to *be* Christ's own body, the body of the one whose exaltation derives directly from God's own power." We do what we do – worship, teach, gather, serve – because of who Christ is. That keeps us humble, but it also strengthens us, encourages us, motivates us.

Because it is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, it is also the last Sunday of the particular lectionary cycle we are in. We have a three-year rotation; as I have said, it's very optional and voluntary for us Presbyterians to follow the lectionary, but we do it here for the most part at Third Church. So we say good-bye to Year A and hello next Sunday to Year B. Pretty creative. Each lectionary year focus on a particular gospel, so we will also say goodbye to a particular emphasis on Matthew's gospel, whose parables have been challenging us all fall.

But Matthew gets one last crack at us on Christ the King Sunday. And again, we get a king, a Jesus, whose inclination to delineation makes us uneasy. Again, we would want a polite, civil, *nice* Jesus. What we get is a Jesus who separates, sheep and goats, wheat and chaff. But notice how it happens. It is not about wealth. It is not about doctrinal and dogmatic purity. It is about our response to the ethical demands of the gospel. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just

as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” And later; “... just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

Charles Cousar helps us understand an extraordinary dynamic that is at play. Christ is king and lord, the one who has left and returned. But he is also the one who has been least and lost, hungry, naked, sick, imprisoned. (Pages 575-577) The greatest of these is also the least of these. “Christ the King,” Cousar writes, “the exalted figure whom the Christian community anticipates and before whom the nations are gathered, is present among the outcast and lonely. They become his designated representatives, so that in serving them one serves the ... Lord.”

And then Cousar reminds us of one thing more. We cannot separate the one who judges and the one represented by the poor with the one who is crucified. “The judge has himself become the victim of human judgment.”

Several years ago, the phrase WWJD was in high vogue. WWJD – “What Would Jesus Do.” That phrase came out of a particular part of the American Christian experience with an emphasis on certain responses to certain social issues. I didn’t get a WWJD bracelet or hat or t-shirt or bumper sticker, nor am I likely to do so now. But in retrospect it’s not a bad question – “What Would Jesus Do?” And it gets fully explored today.

We will not say the Apostles’ Creed today, but we could. It’s somewhere on the inside cover of your hymnal if it’s been a while. Creeds often reflect the battles of the era, and it is clear from word count that who Jesus was was a point of contention in the Apostles’ Creed.. Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, he rose from the dead...” Each of these affirmations matters, because they helped our predecessors in faith, and help us, understand who he was.

This morning we will say together a portion of a more recent faith statement. Notice what we say about Jesus, and what we don’t. In the Apostles’ Creed, his earthly ministry is absent: born of the Virgin Mary, (comma) suffered under Pontius Pilate. Those things still matter, but our recent move has been to highlight his earthly ministry. Look at what he did, and look, therefore, at what we are called to do.

What Would Jesus Do? We know. Teach. Heal. Welcome.

On Christ the King Sunday we remember this comprehensive, holistic, integrated vision. Christology, the theologians call it. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. That is the ultimate affirmation we make about him. It’s why we can sing both “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” We may empathize one of those over the other; history certainly has done it. But rather than get tied up in theological knots, what I have been doing recently is overlaying human experience with how we understand who Jesus is. And I need to say, not always easily, but certainly completely, it has been helpful.

When I think about Jesus welcoming the children, I take inspiration from that mandate as we think about Rochester schools.

When Jesus comforted those who were mourning, I take comfort as I feel sadness or grief in my own life, and extend comfort to others.

When Jesus took on the powers of religion and politics, I remember our own mandate to speak truth to power, especially for those who are left out.

When Jesus spoke to the outsiders, those different, I remember our call to do the same, and go to places I might not otherwise go.

When Jesus stepped away to regroup, I remember our own need for rest and rejuvenation before we rejoin and re-engage an active world.

When Jesus called ordinary people to do extraordinary things, I remember my own call to serve, my own gifts, made manifest and real despite my human limitations, and the common ministry to which we are called

When Jesus looked death square in the face, I remember that I needn't be afraid.

If nothing else today, as we think about Jesus, we can re-ask the question "what would Jesus do," and have some sense of a response. He would give. He would share. He would challenge. He would suffer. He would welcome. He would provoke. And we remember that because that's what he does for us and to us and with us, that's what we are called to do as well.

You will not find a Christ the King greeting card at Hallmark. But you will find people living lives differently because his life has been imprinted on their hearts and souls. So that whatever we call him – Lord, King, savior, redeemer, companion, brother, friend...we call him, because he calls us. Amen.