

Nov. 20, 2022
Christ the King
Luke 23:33-43
Pastor Susan Langhauser's retirement
Rev. Roger Gustafson, Bishop Emeritus

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator and the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Good morning! It is a very great privilege to be invited to return to this pulpit and share God's word with you, especially on this day, momentous as it is, Pastor Susan's last Sunday before her retirement after nearly a third of a century of ministry with and among you.

This will not, however, be a eulogy for Pastor Susan. After all, she is still very much with us, alive and well and ready for the next phase of whatever God might have in mind for her life and ministry. No; today is momentous also because it is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. Next Sunday ushers in the season of Advent and the beginning of a new church year. So today is a reminder to us that one fruitful chapter must end so that another fruitful chapter might truly begin.

It's interesting to note that the Gospel reading for every Christ the King Sunday, whether that reading comes from Matthew, or Luke, or John, always focuses on some aspect of the end of Jesus's earthly life, some aspect of the Crucifixion.

This year the account comes from Luke, and the images in this scene capture our attention: The stark place of execution called The Skull; Jesus asking his heavenly Father to forgive those who are torturing him; the self-righteous, heartless church leaders who ridicule him; the soldiers who increase the pain; the dying criminals on either side of Jesus literally helpless themselves, and in their helplessness show either great contempt or great faith.

Almost lost in that swirl of noisy, dramatic images is the quiet one, the one in the very center of the reading: "There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'"

According to John's Gospel that sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so that it would be accurately read by as wide an audience as possible. The sign was actually a legal requirement: When the empire executed someone they had to publicize the crime the person had committed. As far as Rome was concerned there was only one king over Israel, and that was Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor.

But that sarcastic sign communicated far more than simply information. It communicated a message from the Empire, and the message was crystal clear: You want to buck the system and the powers-that-be? This is what you can expect. You want to challenge the emperor and claim that there is another power at work, a kingdom that's governed by forgiveness and justice and mercy instead of brute force? This is how you end up: as a broken, bloody, so-called Messiah, the 'King of the Jews.'

What was on full display that day, in the Crucifixion and the message that came with it, was the ultimate use of a power that Biblical scholar Robert Capon has called Right-Handed Power. Right-Handed Power is applying the force you need to get the result you want. It's how the world works; it's direct, straight-line, no-nonsense.

That power is used in a variety of ways, for good and for ill. An oppressive use of that power is at work whenever one person or group controls and dominates another person or group. For example, that's what Pax Romana – the Peace of Rome – was all about: In the time of Jesus, Rome maintained peace in its expanding empire through the use of force. Look around today and

you see things haven't change much: When one nation invades another, that's Right-Handed Power, the application of force. But that version of power has its positive uses as well. We deal with it every day. The speed limit is 75; if you go 85 (and if the Highway Patrol is around), you're going to get a ticket. When you're hired you're given a job description; if you fail to perform up to expectations, you're going to get fired. Whether used for good or ill, Right-Handed Power always highlights and promotes the values of those in charge.

Even the disciples bought into that kind of power. When two of them came to Jesus and told him, "We want you to do for us whatever we want: Grant that we'll sit at your right and your left when you rule in glory," they were operating by the values of the Empire, the Kingdom of Caesar. "We want to experience greatness the way we see greatness displayed all around us: Prominence, Popularity, Success. *Right-Handed Power!*"

Which led Jesus to teach them about a very different operating system, what Martin Luther would come to call Left-Handed Power, a power expressed not in domination and control but in abundant love and sacrificial service. So Jesus told those two disciples who were interested in glory: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Those values of abundant love and sacrificial service must have been on the Apostle Paul's mind when he wrote to the Corinthians that we are to actively seek the advantage not of ourselves but the advantage of our neighbor. And when he wrote to the church at Rome, Paul said we are to please the neighbor for the purpose of building up the neighbor.

In other words, it isn't about us; it's about the person right in front of us, the neighbor.

Many years ago when Ronald Reagan was campaigning for president he became famous for asking a very clarifying question: Are you better off now than you were four years ago? That was the Right-Handed Power question, the self-interest question, the "what's in it for me" question. A Left-Handed Power question, the question Jesus might have asked, is: Is your *neighbor* better off now than she was four years ago?

There is real power in putting the neighbor first. Jesus demonstrated that power when he humbled himself and knelt down to wash the feet of his disciples on the night before he gave his life for them, and for us. He was on the path that would lead to the ultimate expression of God's Left-Handed Power: Resurrection from the dead.

Take just a moment and look at the cross above the altar, take a good look. This is Christ the King Sunday, and *that* is God's idea of royalty, the royalty of Christ: One single act of selfless love that led to salvation for all of creation, including you and me.

So what does all of this mean for us in the Jesus Culture, the Church, we who live and operate in both kingdoms at the same time? We're born into the kingdom of the world. But in our baptism we are reborn into the Kingdom of God, and *that* kingdom has the greater claim on us because the Left-Handed Power of that kingdom, given to us as a gift in our baptism, courses through our veins and wants to transform the kingdom of the world.

That transformation begins when we pay attention to how God is already active in this world, and do our best to keep up.

I recently completed a brief ministry as a guest preacher in Germany, at The American Church in Berlin. The congregation is actually international in its makeup, with more than 40 countries represented in its membership, and it attracts many visitors every Sunday. At the end of the worship service on my second Sunday, I was standing at the sanctuary doors, greeting worshipers as they walked out into the brilliant sunshine of a new day. A man introduced himself

to me and said, “I’m a Muslim visiting Berlin from Egypt. Is it OK that I took Holy Communion today?”

Now, as a bishop of the church I know the rules that govern the ELCA, and the rules say that Holy Communion is reserved for those who have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I didn’t ask, but I doubted that the man in front of me, who had identified as Muslim, had been baptized as a Christian. So by that metric of baptism, it was clearly not OK. But our rules also make it clear that the invitation to Holy Communion comes only from Jesus Christ himself.

Did Jesus not check with the ELCA before inviting my new Muslim friend to the table? Or did Jesus use Left-Handed Power to remind us once again that we have a God who is totally free and who operates well beyond our formulas and our approval to accomplish God’s purposes in God’s own way?

To the man in front of me, as foreign to me and my background and experience as could be and yet now connected to me by a holy meal in ways neither of us could truly understand, I said, “Yes. It’s more than OK, and I praise God that you’re here.” When we submit to God’s Left-Handed Power we submit to being used in ways we might never imagine.

What surprising, life-giving activity does God have underway here in southern Johnson County, and how might you keep up? That’s the exciting, creative question that’s ever before you as a congregation, led now by the excellent and deeply faithful Pastor Anteneh.

And so we come to the end not only of the church year but also to the end of Pastor Susan’s ministry here at Advent.

When pastors conclude their tenure they often participate in an exit interview – with the church council, sometimes with the bishop – to see how things have gone. After 32 years it might be tempting to do some counting – just exactly how many sermons, how many hospital visits, how many morning devotions, how many Bible studies, how many funerals, how many potlucks, how many weddings, how many pastoral calls, how many confirmations, and the list goes on. That kind of calculating can be interesting and even important, the kind of calculating that belongs squarely to the Kingdom of Caesar, the kingdom of Right-Handed Power where value and significance are computed and measured.

But there is no way to calculate love, and love is what a pastor’s ministry is really all about – love that is often unseen, love that often operates in unremarkable ways, but always at work to help bring about what we ask for every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer and say, “Thy kingdom come.”

And that ministry of love belongs not only to the office of pastor but to the entire congregation. Luther reminds us in the Small Catechism that the Kingdom of God is unstoppable and *will come*, but in the Lord’s Prayer we pray that it comes also among us, here and now. And that’s where you come in, good, beloved people of Advent, you priesthood of all believers, you bearers of Left-Handed Power. In order to help bring in that kingdom, you have a message to give and to live out here in this world that God so loves.

Several years ago, the Barna Group, a public opinion survey organization, conducted a survey of random Americans in which they asked one question. The question was this: “What is the one thing you most want to hear from another person?” Good question, don’t you think? What’s the one thing you most want to hear from another person?

They conducted the survey, compiled the results, and reported out on the top three responses. The top response, the one thing most people wanted to hear from another person, was “I love you.” Pretty predictable, right? The second most-often-desired response was almost as

predictable: “I forgive you.” The third most-desired response, after “I love you” and “I forgive you” was “Dinner is ready.”

I love you, I forgive you, dinner is ready – that’s exactly the message God has for this world, and God has chosen you to deliver it. God bless you as you carry out his work!

Amen.