



In the Center of Brokenness

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
Christ the King, November 24, 2019, Luke 23:33-43*

Today is the grande finale of the liturgical year. It is the last Sunday after Pentecost, the last Sunday before next week when Advent starts again, Advent which is the church's new year. This Sunday, traditionally, is called Christ the King Sunday. It imagines a world in which the reign of God permeates everything, in which the Beloved Community is everywhere. And yet the gospel text from today depicts a scene in which the Beloved Community seems to be the furthest thing from reality. It depicts Jesus dying a torturous death between two other criminals. It depicts a scene in which by all appearances, it is not the reign of God which controls, but the power of empire. When Roman soldiers nailed a sign into the cross over Jesus' head, the sign which said "This is the King of the Jews," their point was obvious and brutal. This is what happens to people who oppose the system, so be forewarned. This is what happens when people claim a loyalty outside what is sanctioned. What happens is suffering, and failure, and death, by all the ways the world measures things.

And yet we call this "Christ the King Sunday." This moment of suffering and failure is our grand finale. It's actually truly a miracle anyone ever kept following the Way of Jesus. So what does this have to do with us, today, here at St. John's, in Minneapolis in 2019? What does it mean?

In the world outside our doors, the nation has been embroiled in impeachment hearings. Everyone is arguing about what is true and about how insidious the other side's motives are. Russia and Ukraine and corruption are all thrown into the mix. In the world at St. John's, we've had to deal with a painful loss, of Shane Sanders Marcus who is not working with us anymore. Thankfully for us, and for

the nation, these difficult things are not the only thing happening. Mike and Stacy Walters, and Michael Morrow and Kate McKinnon, are all expecting their first grandchildren. Forty-six middle schoolers from around ECMN had a rowdy overnight retreat here at St. John's this weekend, complete with a bouncy house in the Parish Hall, which was truly a sight to behold. They learned about grace, the grace of God, which can never be earned, and is constant whether we deserve it or not. On Friday the Episcopal Church in Minnesota announced two excellent candidates for our next Bishop, the Rev. Canon Abbott Bailey and the Very Rev. Craig Loya. So in the world of St. John's and in the world around us, there is the usual mix of painful and holy, exciting and gut-wrenching. And into the midst of all that is happening within and around us, Christ crucified stands as the image of what it looks like when God reigns.

So what in the world does this mean and why should anyone sign up if this is our brand?

I was meeting with a few other priests this past week, and we were each sharing something about what our ministries are like these days. To begin with we engaged in a practice called Gospel Based Discipleship, where we explored today's gospel text and asked what we thought God was saying to us personally and to us as a community through it. And what came through to us was clear and so very beautiful. What we saw, what we felt, was that the image of Christ crucified means that God meets us always at the very center of brokenness. If you want to know where God is, look for where there is the most trouble. God is suffering there with us. If you want to know where God is, look for where there is the most accusation, the most cruelty. God is there breaking the cycle of violence by absorbing the accusation and the cruelty into God's own being. If you want to know where God is, look for the places where some of those who are guilty are stuck in rage and bitterness, but some of the guilty break through to moments of clarity and asking for help. God is there with them, inviting them to hope. Today you will be with me in paradise, says Jesus to the thief who asks him to remember him. God always shows up at the center of brokenness, when there is no way out, and is intimately and compassionately present.

Of course, we who are Easter people know that the story does not end there. Jesus dies, and a terrible and empty day follows, Holy Saturday, in which the disciples flounder because they have lost their Beloved and also everything they thought they were following him to accomplish. Easter Sunday comes, and the grieving community encounters the empty tomb. Christ is risen. And as theologian Lesslie Newbigin says, the vast explosion of hope, love and joy from the resurrection quickly permeates the four quarters of the compass. But Christ the King Sunday does not yet anticipate the resurrection of Jesus. Christ the King Sunday stays riveted at the image of Jesus hanging between two criminals, forgiving them and the soldiers and the people because they truly don't know what they are doing.

It sounds great that God is with us when we are suffering, but is it really true? It sounds great that God forgives even those who are monstrously guilty, but how does it help?

As I've wrestled with this, what gives me hope is that I perceive a God who will go to any lengths to be with us without conditions. This God is willing to lose everything to encounter us at the center of brokenness. The reason we can call this Christ the King Sunday, the reason we can envision a world in which the reign of God permeates everything, is that because of the cross Jesus is already present everywhere that the worst is happening. At the very worst humans can do, God has entered the scene for the sake of solidarity, and offering the possibility of forgiveness and healing, which just means no longer being defined by the wrongs you have committed and that have been committed against you. And in the end, God wins, love wins, because God has risked and has lost everything to be with us. There is nowhere that God is not. Nothing can defeat a love that is without conditions. It is the only thing more powerful than sin and brokenness and death.

This is true for St. John's. It is true for Donald Trump. It is true for Democrats and Republicans. It is true for Shane and Clara and their kids. It is true for you and for me.

This turns all our notions of power upside down. What is powerful is not winning the election. It is breaking through to the place of freedom beyond all that we have done and ever could do, where God meets us simply, as we are, in the totality of our being. In that place, God offers us grace. As the middle schoolers at the Pre-TEC retreat here at St. John's learned this weekend, grace cannot be earned, it cannot be deserved. But it can offer us a new identity, and forgiveness, and transformation. Grace does not mean that the terrible things we have done are OK. It does mean that the terrible things we have done and that have been done to us do not have the last word, because the love of God is greater.

This week, as you are walking through the world, I invite you to try seeing things through a new lens. Wherever you see brokenness, and there is plenty of it, I invite you to literally superimpose a mental image of Christ crucified there in the middle of it, there in the center of brokenness. Christ saying, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. Then take a moment to pray for that situation, whatever it is. Then take one more step. How does God's presence in the midst of the brokenness change what you see? How does it change what you perceive God asking you to do in that moment?

The reign of God, the kingdom of God, cannot only be about some impossibly distant future in which nothing is ever broken ever again. It has to be about today, also. At the center of brokenness, to the thief who acknowledges his fault, Jesus says, Today you will be with me in paradise. Today. May Christ encounter us in our brokenness, today, through the grace of God. May Christ absorb and transform all that we ever have been and ever shall be, and let us walk in the Paradise of God's reign. Amen.