

Sermon – “Eyes of the Heart”

Scripture Readings: Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 2017

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Today, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the Church year and in keeping with our Presbyterian Heritage, St. Andrew’s Sunday. Our first Scripture reading is Ephesians 1:15-23. Paul writes to the believers in Ephesus with much affection. The reading today is a prayer that moves from thanksgiving to intercession to doxology. Paul asks that those for whom he gives thanks in his remembrances may see with the “eyes of the heart” enlightened as they live out their calling to be the children of God. Hear now God’s Holy word.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love^[a] toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe, according to the working of God’s great power. ²⁰ God^[b] put this power to work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and seated Christ at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ 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. ²² And God has put all things under Christ’s feet and has made Christ the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of Christ who fills all in all. Amen.

Our second reading for today is Matthew 25:31-46, the final judgment. It is customary to interpret this passage in universal terms where we are all judged. Another interpretation is that this is the judgement of those gentiles who are neither Jewish proselytes nor Christian converts. The Greek word *ethne* interpreted “nations” referred specifically to gentiles in the first century. A number of ancient Jewish texts express concern for righteous gentiles. Was it fair for them to be eternally damned? Paul, as a Christian, echoes the same concern in his Letter to the Romans. This parable sets a standard by which those outside our faith shall be judged and sets an ethical standard for all faiths. By showing kindness to “the least of these” we serve those with whom our Savior identifies. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

³¹ “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. ³² 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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ 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,^[a] you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Amen.

The title of the sermon: “The Eyes of the Heart”

The text: “so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you...” Ephesians 1:18

Let us pray. Loving God, our prayer today is that we too may see with the eyes of our heart. Teacher and humble King—give us your perspective. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The Eyes of the Heart is the name of one of Frederick Buechner’s memoirs. A contemporary American writer, theologian, and ordained Presbyterian minister, Buechner has written more than 30 books. In this memoir, his late grandmother joins him in the sacred space of his library for a conversation about shared memories, loss of loved ones, and life after death. He listens to his fears, anxieties and hopes through the eyes of the heart, and invites his readers to discover with him the hope to which God has called us.

On this final service of the liturgical year, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday through the eyes of the heart as we affirm that Christ is like no other king we have ever known. In Christ God demonstrated the power of sacrificial love. As Christians we can never separate Christ the King from the cross that he climbed, from the peace he proclaimed, and from the wounds he took upon himself to make us whole. We delight in the pomp and circumstance of our Scottish tradition with drum and pipes and we raise the empty cross to affirm the triumph of good over evil in the sacrificial death of our Savior.

Not all processions are delightful. Several years ago on the occasion of the anniversary of the ordination of women, I spent a weekend at a celebration in Chicago that culminated with worship at Fourth Presbyterian Church. Dr. John Buchanan preached a thoughtful sermon reflecting on the richness and strength within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as women have been given the opportunity to share leadership with men in the twentieth century. Women were ordained as deacons in 1906, as elders in 1930, and as ministers in 1956.

He told a poignant story about the ongoing struggle of women in other denominations and an experience Sister Joan Chittister, well known author on spirituality and a Benedictine nun within the Roman Catholic Church, shared in her book *Called to Question*. She attended the opening liturgy for the annual bishops’ conference at the Basilica in Washington, D.C. which began with a procession of 250 male bishops marching down the center aisle in their red robes with the light of the clerestory (cler story) windows shining on their miters. She later wrote, “I have never felt more isolated and excluded within my church and I have never seen so much pomp for so little circumstance.” (*Called to Question*, p. 18)

I think we, as the Church, need to be mindful about our pomp and circumstance and how we may use it to isolate and exclude others. The older I get the less comfortable I am with the emphasis of Christ as King.

Theologian Joanna van Wijk-Bos, in her book Reimagining God, gives a history of the title “king” for God. Actually, it does not occur in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. Of the roughly forty occurrences of “king” for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, over half are clustered in a group of psalms that celebrate God’s kingship in a general and cosmic sense.

God's kingship is contrasted with human kings, who often crush people, while God lifts up those who are falling.

The New Testament use of the word "king" for God or Christ is infrequent. The dominant title of "Lord" was used for respect and during Jesus' time referred to any lawful owner of property. Later, it came to mean any male of higher rank and authority than oneself. At the time of the Roman Empire the title "lord" was applied to the Emperor. The authority in the titles "king" and "lord" not only render a picture of a predominantly male God, whose earthly rule is more often unjust, but they also create an image of the human community in submission to God as king and lord.

Although believers risked their lives by affirming Christ as "lord" and "king" the first three hundred years following Christ's death, once the church became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century and began to gain power, there was an unfortunate misuse of that power, of that pomp and circumstance that grew over the centuries.

Roland Bainton outlines this abuse of power in his book Christianity. It is quite humbling to take an honest look through the eyes of the heart at the misuse of power within Christ's church. The cross on which Christ sacrificed his beloved life "for the least of these" tragically became a weapon of kings and popes during the crusades of the twelve and thirteenth centuries, and a bully pulpit for indulgences and taxation to keep the people subject in Christ's kingdom during the Middle Ages. Bainton also recounts the vivid picture that the fourteenth century reformer John Huss drew highlighting the contrast between Christ riding on a donkey to Jerusalem and the pope riding on a stallion with the people crowding to kiss his feet.

Today, 500 years after the Reformation, all of us who are a part of Christ's church, regardless of our denomination, need to be accountable with regard to the wielding of our power, the vision of our hearts, and the fulfillment of Christ's mission. Let us not exclude or isolate others in the pomp and circumstance of religious lives that are not lived justly or generously.

Rather, on this Christ the King Sunday, let us remember *the heart of the humble king* who identifies with the hungry, the homeless, the sick and the prisoner so much so that he said, "Whatever you have done for the least of these, you have done it for me."

On this Christ the King Sunday, let us remember *the heart of the mocked king* who was betrayed and victimized by a political struggle and who taught us "to return no one evil for evil, to strengthen the fainthearted, and to support the weak."

On this Christ the King Sunday, let us remember *the heart of the king who wore a crown of thorns*, who saved others but not himself and who taught us "to help the suffering and to honor everyone."

By the grace of God, may we see all of creation and the least of these through the love of Christ and the eyes of the heart. Amen.