

Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 2017  
Gospel According to Matthew 25:31-46  
Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church  
Sermon by Rev. Anne Van Kley

When I was a kid, we sang the same Hymn of Praise nearly every week at my church. (At least that's how I remember it.) And it was my favorite part of worship. Not for some deep, meaningful reason, but because it was a fun song to sing! My brothers and I would always sing the chorus the same way: "This is the fe-e-e-ast of VICTory for our God!"

We loved that part! It made us laugh every time. To this day, whenever we sing that particular setting, it gives me the giggles. It's a fun hymn! It's uplifting, it's victorious, it's a song for winners, right?

Thankfully this congregation uses a lot more liturgical variation than the church I grew up in, but we are sure to sing the Feast of Victory song today, because today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday.

It's the last Sunday of the Church year. Next week we begin the church calendar again, with Advent and the preparation for the coming of Jesus. And we'll begin the cycle all over again. But first, today, it's Christ the King. All the things befitting a New Year's Eve party! Triumph and victory and the celebration of a seemingly unbeatable kingdom!

We sing, "This is the feast of victory for our God. Power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and blessing and glory and might are his." Whew. That's intense. In today's language we might sing, "Strength and money and popularity and political power and success are his!"

We are singing a championship song. A triumphant song about a feast of victory – a huge party that traditionally would be thrown after a battle, in honor of the military leaders who destroyed their enemies and came home "winners." Christ the King Sunday is the day we celebrate our powerful, heroic, winningest Jesus. It's huge.

But wait...

Who is this baby in manger? Surrounded by filth and animals; held by a young mother who will soon become a refugee, fleeing to save her baby's life? Who is this unpopular, strange rabbi – breaking Sabbath rules and talking to dirty people? Disgusting religious leaders and doing things that should be beneath him? Who is this failure of a man, dying on a cross? Breathing words of forgiveness to those who have killed him? This does not look like a king. This does not look like the winningest team to be on.

He's naked? He's hungry? He's in prison? He's sick? This does not look like strength and money and success. No. In this world that you and I live in – Jesus would not be defined as a king. He would be called a huge loser. Our feast of victory, then, is kind of ironic, isn't it?

The thing is, friends...I think we all know this. We already know that we are supposed to follow Jesus – the lamb who was slain – the king who humbled himself. The one who serves instead of being served. The one who died so we could live. We know it. We want to believe it. That's why we are here. We *want* to be people who follow Jesus, not some other false kingdom.

And sometimes we even follow him pretty well. We do feed the hungry when we can. We give our money to good causes when we can afford to. We smile at our neighbors and let grumpy people off the hook and try to live as nice, Christian people.

But the truth is that this empire we live in is so powerful. It's so powerful, in fact, that it fights us and shapes us in ways we don't even realize. It's toxic to our hearts and our minds and our souls. It's so powerful that even though we know in our hearts we should not strive for money and reputation and success...we still do. We fight it in ourselves every day.

This empire – this culture – has power over us that causes us to think and behave in ways we know are not Jesus' ways. So that we *do* want all those things our neighbors have, that we don't have. We wish we were prettier, or had a bigger kitchen, or a newer car. We long to be popular in school, or to be offered promotions and big titles at work. We want to be winners, not losers.

Yes, this empire works hard on us, through messages and cultural norms and systems we aren't even aware of. And it holds power over us, with ads and lies and fears that try to tear us from God, tear us from each other, tear us even within our selves.

The empire we live in *wants* to keep us unsatisfied; it *wants* to keep us suspicious of each other; it *wants* to keep us feeling like we have to look out for ourselves and our families and our country FIRST. Because as long as we are striving to win by human standards – the powerful keep their power. And let's be honest, we all benefit from the systems that keep the naked naked, and the hungry hungry, and the oppressed oppressed. As long as we aren't in their shoes ourselves, we benefit from the privilege others lack.

It's hard to face this truth. On the one hand we want to follow Jesus and sometimes we even do – and on the other hand it's so inconvenient to follow him *all* the way to the cross. All the way to humility and service and sacrifice. All the way to putting the well-being of others ahead of our own. Who wants to be a loser?

And yet, we profess to follow a king who said, "Whoever wants to keep their life will lose it." Whoever wants to really know Jesus will give up those human standards of success.

Unlike the empire -- Jesus doesn't lord power *over* us, in order to control us or keep us down. Jesus teaches us his way because he wants to lift us up -- to be raised up with him.

He wants us to know love like he knows love. He wants us to know the freedom we can have when we stop striving for empty things. He wants us to know the joy of giving, and the abundant life that grows when we turn away from those social pressures that burden us.

What would happen if we all gave up on wanting that bigger kitchen or that newer car? If we stopped wanting more recognition and attention from our peers? If we quit hoping for something bigger and better to come along? If we just stopped to truly give thanks for all we do have, and put that energy into serving someone in actual need, instead?

God knows what would happen:  
Freedom. Joy. Abundant life.

Saint Augustine talked about "Sin" as a "turning inward." I find that to be a helpful image, because when we are turned inward, focused on ourselves; when we are busy keeping up with the world's version of "success and power," we miss seeing the goodness that is all around us. We miss seeing and knowing Jesus. We miss the chance to be in a relationship with one who accepts us just as we are...who doesn't ask us to be bigger or prettier or richer or smarter or healthier or younger or whatever...but who just loves us as his children, created in God's image.

Christ the King Sunday is an opportunity to remember the truth that Jesus really is more powerful than all of the lies the world tries to tell us. Christ the King Sunday is a day to celebrate Christ's victory over all the false gods and the fears that try to keep power over us. And it's an opportunity to sort of "re-calibrate" before we begin a new year.

So we can get ready for the real king -- the one who comes as a vulnerable baby in a manger. The one who will risk unpopularity and scorn for the sake of those who need help. The one who will die breathing words of love and forgiveness for our sake.

Today we are called to set aside our false notions of power, and to adjust our expectations. To open our eyes and prepare to meet our real king, Jesus. Not just in a manger on Christmas Eve, but all around us -- in our neighbors, and our enemies; in our families, and our friends; in our co-workers and classmates; in our addicted and ill and imprisoned and homeless and immigrant and refugee neighbors; even maybe, deep inside our own broken selves --

When we stop searching for greatness in all the wrong places, we'll see Jesus, and know the love of God. And that's really the only thing that can satisfy us, anyway. Everything else is just a temporary fix.

*This*, this life of love and humble service, is the real feast of victory -- the great party -- that we get to be a part of. Alleluia! Amen.