

“Realm of Christ”
First Presbyterian Church
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

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Lake Forest, Illinois
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Christ the King Sunday

A few years ago, in an interview with *The Times*, affirmative action opponent Ward Connerly had this exchange:

Reporter: “What are you?”
Connerly: “I am an American.”
Reporter: “No no, no! What are you?”
Connerly: “Yes, yes, yes! I am an American.”
Reporter: “That is not what I mean. I was told that you are African American. Are you ashamed to be African American?”
Connerly: “No, I am just proud to be an American” (Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) p.6).

I discovered this interchange in Samuel Huntington’s book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*. Huntington, for one, deplores the proliferation of what he calls “subnational” identities: Afro-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, and so on. He believes it undermines our common identity: our identity as Americans.

Now, I am less worried about this profusion of identities; we are, after all, from different ethnic backgrounds, we hold different marital statuses and genders, we have different economic resources, and so forth. As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving, and recall that first Thanksgiving feast, at which Native Americans and English émigrés sat at table together, I find it ridiculous to suppose that all Americans are all alike. I prefer the “tossed salad” approach to national identity to the “melting pot” idea. It’s just more interesting, and in a democracy, variety itself ought not to threaten our sense of American pride. There’s room, I think, for sub-national identities, and there’s room as well for a good old-fashioned American identity.

But I contend that we who gather here this morning also have a *supra*-national identity, a higher identity: our identity as Christians. Though we are all citizens of our nation, we are even more citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Today, the Sunday before Thanksgiving in our nation, also happens to be Christ the King Sunday in the church worldwide. So today I want to explore our identity under the sovereignty of Christ ... and what that means in very practical ways.

Let’s begin with what it means for our allegiances, particularly as American Christians.

In the last few decades the Christian right has revived the role of religion in American identity. The rise of the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, and many other organizations has capitalized on the notion that our Christian faith has something powerful to say to our national priorities. This may surprise you, but I agree. Don’t misunderstand: I do not concur with many of their conclusions; nor am I in favor of a theocracy, in which religion rules our government. Our freedom is just too precious to us. But I am in favor of Christians having faith guide our personal politics and moral priorities. And, if I may be so bold this early in my tenure here, let me confess that I am frankly tired of the voice of the far Christian right being the only Christian voice that’s heard. Recently, Episcopal priest and former Republican Senator John Danforth put it this way:

“People of faith are not of one mind ... [on] how religion relates to politics. In recent years, conservative Christians have presented themselves as representing the one authentic Christian perspective. ... With due respect, equally

devout Christians come to very different conclusions. It is important for those of us who are sometimes called moderates to make the case that we, too, have strongly held Christian convictions, that we speak from the depths of our beliefs, and that our approach ... is at least as faithful” (John Danforth, *New York Times* Op-Ed, 6/17/05).

I am more than ready for the “Silent Majority” to stop being silent. There is an alternative way in which our Christian identity might shape our national values – not just as supporters of our government; not just as participants in our economy; not just as consumers of our culture ... but also as its honest and discerning and sophisticated critics. As Christians, *inevitably* the sovereignty of God sometimes puts us in direct conflict with our national, economic, and cultural interests. It was true for the earliest Christians’ relationship with Rome, and it is still true today. As evangelical Christian Jim Wallis writes, “Christians should always live uneasily with empire, which constantly threatens to become idolatrous and substitute secular purposes for God’s.” It doesn’t matter whether the empire is benign or sinister; *any* human empire is secondary to the sovereignty of God.

But Christ’s sovereignty commands more than our passive allegiance. Christ’s sovereignty also invites our active endorsement of his will. “We are ambassadors for Christ,” the Scripture tells us, and as his emissaries, we are entrusted with the promotion of Christ’s will.

Five years ago, when I attended an Executive Seminar at the Aspen Institute (and stayed for their conference on globalization, which changed my life – itself a long story) – five years ago at Aspen, I met a truly amazing man. His name is Alan Nazareth; he lives in India, where he served as his country’s ambassador. In that role, by the way, he was very quietly brought in to help broker the remarkable *détente* between Egypt and Israel many years ago. He also happens to be a Christian – a Roman Catholic – in a nation which is predominantly Hindu and Muslim. I asked Ambassador Nazareth what it meant to him to have allegiance to Christ over allegiance to his country ... what it meant, in other words, to be an ambassador for Christ. He reflected on his own work first, saying:

“An ambassador is a fully empowered representative of his country ... [whose] mission is to make known ... the policies and actions of his Government and [to] promote its *interests* as [well as] its friendship. ... [An ambassador] therefore has to be well informed of the interests and policies of his country and Government, not only in the political field but in all fields. His expertise ... has to be deep and broad” (personal correspondence, 5/30/01).

Therefore, representing Christ begins with making known God’s “policies and actions” and promoting God’s “interests as well as its friendship.” This assumes, of course, that we know what they are: God’s policies, like his law; his actions, like the cross; his interests, like our wholeness, and peace in the world, and the health of the earth, and his deep desire for friendship with all of his children. As Ambassador Nazareth says, our knowledge must be both ‘deep and broad.’

To put it on a very pedestrian level, a college student I know applied to be a server at a restaurant – but before Jessica could go out on the floor, she was required to memorize the entire menu – not just the names of each of the dishes, from appetizer to dessert, but the *descriptions* and *ingredients* of each item, like “spicy brown sauce made with a beef-based *roux*.” As Christians, it ought to terrify us not to know the menu before we’re sent out to serve. I won’t pretend it’s easy; learning the Bible, and faith, even knowing how to pray – it doesn’t happen

overnight. But we *need* to be deeply familiar, if we're ready to go out "on the floor" in Christ's name.

Because just as soon as anyone knows we're Christians, we're out there, representing Christ. Being his ambassador is a 24/7 job ... and we're never off-duty, in our homes or workplaces or school or on vacation. Can this bring conflict of interest? You bet. In fact, if it doesn't, that means something's terribly wrong. Our penultimate allegiances will inevitably strain against our ultimate allegiance to the Lord. It takes constant discernment and a deliberate vigor of intent ... just to see where the strains lie, before we can even make our choices for the Lord.

For in the end, we do not only hold allegiance to Christ; we are not only ambassadors for Christ; we are, finally, all agents of Christ. And he couldn't be any clearer in his priorities. In his final teaching to his disciples – his last words before he faced his trial by religion and his execution at the hands of the state, Jesus chose to culminate his message with the words we heard this morning:

"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. 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..." [When those who are judged ask, belatedly, on what basis they are cast out] he will say to them, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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. 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."

When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison? The sad fact is, the nature of our defenses and denial protect us from seeing suffering at all. Dr. Anna Case Winters, theology professor at McCormick Seminary, relates her eye-opening experience visiting Ghana, where the faithful Dutch Reformed – a sister church to us -- had established both their trade and missionary work. She says,

"Our hosts took us to see what they call "the slave castles." These fortresses date back to the days of trading rum and sugar and spices. Under the castle were cargo holds where this cargo would be stored until the ships came. In later years, the Dutch traders found a more profitable trade in human beings. West Africans of the area were hunted down, captured and imprisoned. They were held in the cargo holds much like so much cargo. The great doors were dosed and padlocked and not opened again until the slave ships arrived — a period of up to three months. Food was sent down a chute from a window above. . .

We continued the tour and found that just above the cargo hold there was a large open room with big airy windows, a lovely room. "What is this place?" we asked. And they told us it was the *sanctuary* where Dutch Reformed folk worshiped. We were undone when we saw this. ... Could they not hear the cries from below? Did they not make the connections between their faith and what they were doing? We were appalled. Righteous indignation ran through our good company.

"Then we had a bit more revelation. Before we became too self-righteous in our thinking, someone said, "I wonder . . . where are the places that we are not making the connections between faith and life? Where are we oblivious to the

cries of suffering and exploited people? Where do we not hear the cries from below?" (*McCormick Notes*, Winter/Spring 2005, p. 9).

How shocked we were – genuinely shocked – when Hurricane Katrina tore the roof off of the poverty-infested city of New Orleans, and we saw such naked want before our very eyes. And still, right now, there are children in America who are hungry, and we are not feeding them. There are strangers — legal and illegal — who are harassed and humiliated, and we are not welcoming them. There are old people who are sick, who have to choose between buying their food and buying their medication, and we are ignoring them. There are prisoners who are being held without the protection of Geneva Conventions; and there are citizens on our own soil streaming out of our nation's jails who, having done time, don't have a prayer of being employed, and we are pretending they are not there.

Let me be abundantly clear: I am not telling you how to vote or how to run your corporation; I am not equipped to suggest exactly what our governmental or economic solutions ought to be. I am not a political economist or legislative strategist, nor have I ever claimed to be one.

What I am saying is this: if we acknowledge Christ as Lord, then faith requires us also to be agents of his mercy: *to care for the neighbor ... especially the vulnerable neighbor*. This is the most important Christian agenda there can be. And I contend that we all need to become not just ambassadors, but lobbyists for this Christian value.

We have so much sway. Through our voices, which are taken seriously in corridors of power; with our money, which invests in good or ill; in our corporations, which transform communities; in our families, raising our children to see, to understand, to care. We have so much power, and we must choose, each day, how we will use it. What we choose matters ... it matters so terribly much.

Four centuries ago, Spanish writer St. Teresa of Avila said it this way:

Christ has no Body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
Compassion on the world
Yours are the feet with which he walks
To do good
Yours are the hands with which he blesses
All the world.

Yours are the hands. ...Yours are the feet. ...Yours are the eyes. ...You are his body.
Amen.