

“The Community of Christ’s Kingdom”
Ezekiel 34:1-5, 17-22
Matthew 25:31-46
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Christ the King Sunday

This fall we’ve been focusing on our “Moral Compass” – the GPS that guides us through life’s uncertain and rugged terrain. One of the crucial features is that, though our moral compass is hard-wired in every individual, it is calibrated and set *in community*. Each culture has its own calibration – its own way of interpreting what’s pure, or who has authority, or what fairness looks like.

Within any life a number of communities influence our moral values: our families, our nation, our ethnic group, our socio-economic and educational peer-groups, and so forth. It’s no surprise that I think the most important community that shapes our moral compass is our Christian one. Our goal this last month has been to look carefully at the moral calibration offered by our Christian community.

We looked at the way the communion of saints – our forbears in faith -- remind us what we’re made of and give us courage to stand up to our adversity. We looked at the way our Christian community in America invites us to rely on God’s abundance instead of giving in to self-absorption, excess or panic. Last week Amy eloquently showed us how the community of this church inspires us not to hoard what we have but to invest ourselves in God’s vision for the world. This is the power of community in shaping who we are, in guiding how we live our lives.

Today, in our last “take” on our Christian community, we focus on the head of the church: Christ the King, and his crucial influence from the top. As we read the familiar passage about the judgment of the sheep and the goats, keep in mind the reading we just heard from Ezekiel. Jesus is clearly “riffing” on a theme near to God’s heart.

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These are scary times for many people. The Dow closed at 7500 on Thursday, a number we haven't seen in years. The unemployment rate has crept up to 6.5%. Consumer confidence has fallen to an all time low. Foreclosure rates are skyrocketing. Everyone is affected by this wild ride of an economy to some extent. This is an anxious time, a scary time, and it seems like no one is really in charge anymore.

Yet in the midst of this painful reality, churches across the world today are celebrating Christ the King Sunday. It is a day to remember that in the largest sense, the most important sense, there is indeed someone in charge. Jesus reigns at the right hand of God; he is king of kings and Lord of lords. Today we'll explore what difference that Christ's leadership makes to us, and to our frightened world.

Let's start by remembering the huge impact a leader has on any group of people. Last Thursday night our church and Lake Forest College co-sponsored a panel on corporate leadership. The panel included the Honorable J. Michael Luttig, general counsel and senior vice president at Boeing, formerly a judge on the federal bench, and a member of our own congregation. Mike spoke eloquently about the impact of leaders at the top, for good or ill. He cited a number of examples of dreadful failures in moral leadership – Mark Cuban, recently charged with insider trading; Bob Nardelli, whose half-billion dollar severance for six years work provoked wrath for CEO compensation; or Michael Sears, convicted of bribing a Defense Department procurement official with employment. But Mike Luttig also spoke hopefully of “an emerging insistence” on moral responsibility among corporate leaders, including his own CEO at Boeing. He shared his sense that today's leaders “increasingly understand and embrace” the corporation's ethical responsibilities and obligations, “not as a consequence of compulsion, but as product of belief,” a “deep-seated belief that [it] is right” (unpublished remarks used with permission, 11/29/08).

Whether or not Mike is right – and I think he is – one thing became crystal clear in the discussion that followed. Executive after executive in

Thursday's audience – many of them our own members – attested to the truth of this: *no one has more impact on a community than the person with authority at the top*. The CEO sets the priorities and determines the moral expectations of the whole entity. In the corporate world, if the leader values the quarterly report more than anything else, then the rest of the company falls in line, doing anything for short-term results ... even if there's suffering in the long-run. If the leader values his or her own profits over people, then the rest of the company follows suit, indiscriminately slashing hours, jobs and benefits, no matter how ruthless or greedy. But if the leader holds integrity, honesty, and human dignity as the highest values, then the rest of the company will also aspire to those values, making decisions as consistently as possible, sharing information as transparently as possible, and treating employees as humanely as possible.

The leader, more than anyone else, shapes the values of the whole organization. If that is true for corporations, it is no less true for the community of faith. Today, on the day that we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, it's time to focus on the priorities and expectations set by our ultimate leader, Jesus Christ.

Let's look first at priorities. I want to start by acknowledging how hard it is to keep priorities in order – how hard it is to keep perspective these days when pundits breathlessly fan the flames of fear, when you can watch the market's rollercoaster ride moment by moment on CNBC, and when you're afraid of losing your household's income. Whenever emotions are running high – whether in periods of irrational exuberance or desperate panic – whenever emotions are running high, it's the role of the leader to keep calm about priorities. I was talking with one of our members in the banking sector yesterday who said that one of his primary jobs is to help his employees gain perspective. So many of them are young and new to this game, and they are terrified.

Jesus does the same thing for us. Early in the gospel of Matthew he reassures us: "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or

what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. ... Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” I’ve always loved how he closes this passage. He doesn’t disregard our anxiety; he doesn’t say don’t worry because there’s nothing to worry about! He says, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matthew 6:25-34). In other words, take a deep breath, live a day at a time, and concentrate on the things that really matter.

But what is it that matters? It’s funny how our priorities can change in a heartbeat. When we’re healthy and riding high, we can be preoccupied with luxuries like vacations or remodeling; we can focus on advancement at work or the achievements of our kids. There’s nothing wrong with these things. But their *relative* value changes the minute something critically important is at stake: when someone we love falls sick or their marriage is falling apart; when someone dear to us is hungry for food or dying for affection. Suddenly, things are so clear, so central, so basic. There is something clarifying and bracing about those priorities when they come.

What Jesus asks us to do is to *live into those priorities all the time*. Not as a punishment, but as an invitation ... an invitation to remember what constitutes “abundant life” and what is, well, merely stuff. Our status in the community – it is transient. Our employment and income – they are never completely secure. Our homes, possessions, clothing and money – they are ephemeral, here one day and gone another. And in the end *they are not the things that really matter*.

What Jesus offers us instead are priorities of permanent value: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. These are the highest priorities: loving God and neighbor. Like a great mission statement for any business, it couldn’t be clearer. Actions, resources and decisions should all be centered on that mission.

This is the first thing any great leader does: makes the priorities severely clear. And the second thing follows. The second thing a great leader does is to set expectations for his or her team. Everyone needs to be clear about the measurable objectives that move the organization forward. And reward is based on how well we meet those objectives.

That's exactly what Jesus does in this morning's gospel lesson: he shares his expectations, and the reward:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will sit on the throne and separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you: 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, 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’” (Matthew 25:31-46).

Jesus sets out his expectations for his team: he expects us to tend to those who are in physical, spiritual and social need, wherever and whenever we see them.

Is this an achievable objective? It certainly was in Jesus' day, when most people might run into a total of a few hundred people in their village. To care for the small percentage of the sick, the naked, the hungry ... it would be demanding; it would stretch the boundaries of care for one's clan ... it may even require significant sacrifice. But it would be *possible*.

Is it still? Can we tend to everyone we see in need? With the Internet, we see with near-instantaneous clarity the impact of natural disasters, wars, genocides, and famines on *millions of people* at a time. The need is staggering and any response seems so ineffective, that soon we find ourselves immobilized. This reaction already has a name for it: it's called “compassion fatigue.” But Jesus doesn't set us up for failure. So what do we do?

First, keep seeing the people behind the numbers. When we feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of need, focus on the real human beings whose lives are affected. Not just unemployment figures but men who are ashamed they can't put food on the table; not just plummeting portfolios but somebody's grandmother who has to choose between her medicine and dinner. Not just overhead in the company we're running, but human beings, children of God, who deserve dignity and the best shot they can have for the future. Keep looking at the human lives behind the numbers because Jesus tells us they're his own family and through him they're our family now too. Then do something. One of the most powerful antidotes for feeling overwhelmed is to do something for somebody else. Roll up your sleeves at the soup kitchen. Volunteer at PADS. Stock donations at Rummage. And if you're physically unable to do hands-on work, then get on your knees and pray or send whatever contribution you can.

Second, keep being honest about your own need. We are so private here, and so prone to shame. You may think that you're the only person in town who's lost a job or whose house value has gone underwater or who is on a fixed income that's nose-dived. You may think you're the only one who has a stack of requests from worthy charities on your desk and you have to decide which ones you'll support this year. You may think you're the only one who is laying off employees or worrying about how to make payroll. You are not alone. Let your church family reach out to you with compassion. Give me a call or shoot me an email. And if you have ideas you can offer those who are looking for work or advice for those whose houses are facing foreclosure or any other resource you can think of, get in touch with me too. If we cannot see each other's real need in this community -- if we cannot take care of each other here in Christ's church -- then where on earth can we do it?

And we are doing it here. I am so proud of the ways you have taken Christ's priorities to heart and stepped up to his expectations. This week alone I heard of a woman who, every time she passes up her usual latte or other little extravagance takes the money she saved and puts it away to give to a charity at Christmas. I heard of a member whose husband is out of work but who

pledged \$20 to the church anyway out of gratitude to God for her blessings. I heard of a banker who spent his free time stocking shelves at the Greater Chicago Food Depository when Lord knows he had plenty of other things he is under pressure to do. I heard of an executive who is not just skipping his bonus; he is taking a 5% pay *cut* in order to keep more of his people employed next year.

Beloved in Christ: these are difficult times. They will not get better overnight. But now more than ever we are so blessed – we are so richly blessed – to have at our helm Christ the King. He alone determines our values; he alone guides our personal moral compass; he alone sets priorities and expectations for our very lives. And he has done so much more than simply *tell* us. He has shown us with his very flesh and blood: laying down his own life for us, so that each one of us – his precious ones – may live. Amen.