

“A Subversive Kingdom”

Rev. Rob Carter

Christ the King Year A-17

Psalm 100

Matthew 25: 31-46

November 26, 2017

“A Subversive Kingdom”

According to Matthew, it all began on a mount.

Well, first, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan before he was tempted for 40 days in the wilderness. Then, we’re told Jesus began traveling throughout Galilee, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

“Repent,” he said, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It was a strange message coming for a carpenter from Nazareth.

As he continued to make his way throughout Galilee, word spread about this guy who not only talked about the kingdom of heaven, but did such heavenly things as heal the sick, and cure the lame, and restore sight to the blind. So in no time at all, Jesus found himself surrounded by folks not just from Galilee, but from the Decapolis and Samaria and all of Syria. Something like a first century rock star.

So it was then, we’re told, Jesus decided *it was time*. It was time to reveal the kingdom he’d come to inaugurate. So he went to a nearby mountain. We don’t know which one. Scripture just calls it, “a mount.” And he climbed to the top so he could address the surrounding crowds. And he began to tell them about the kingdom of God. The kingdom he came to inaugurate not only in this world, but within each of us, as well.

And to his credit, from the very start of it all... even within his very first lesson, Jesus pulled no punches. He was crystal clear... his kingdom is a subversive one. His kingdom turns the values of this world upside down and inside out. For his subversive kingdom rejects every status quo in which the full are fed before the hungry. His subversive kingdom rejects every system that lifts up the powerful and wealthy while dismissing the weak and poor.

Jesus was clear, in his subversive kingdom, it’s the poor and the sick, the grieving and the outcast and the imprisoned who are favored. He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. And blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers.” He really was as transparent as could be from the very start of it all. In his kingdom, it’s the last who are first and the least who are greatest.

It was, again, a strange message. But more than that, it was a *revolutionary* message. Jesus not only came to reorient this world’s understanding of things like power and wealth and pride. He also came to dismantle our allegiance to them, that we might pledge our allegiance to something much more important, and much more life-giving than the values of this world.

.....

Now... I realize this is the second week in a row I've talked about Jesus' mission being one of "revolution." And I recognize that using such a word can make some uncomfortable. After all, revolution has lots of political overtones to it.

But I use this word with great intentionality because I do believe Jesus was both a religious and political revolutionary. Which means, then, that I believe there are both personal and political ramifications to following Jesus, and seeking the kingdom he came to reveal. Again, he wasn't shy about the subversive values of his kingdom.

Listen to what else Jesus said atop that mount at the very beginning of his ministry.

"You have heard it was said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist and evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'"

And

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.'"

Now, let me be clear. Jesus was not calling for the overthrow of a government—nor was he advocating for any kind of political party or ideology. And neither am I.

But Jesus was calling his followers to live in fundamentally different ways than they had been... with fundamentally different priorities than the rest of society.

And as Matthew's Gospel has showed us throughout this liturgical year, Jesus didn't just talk about it the values of his kingdom. He modeled them, too, in the way he:

embraced the leper;
and cured a centurion's sick servant;
he healed the tormented;
he told paralytics to stand up and walk;
he raised a dead girl back to life,
and touched and healed a hemorrhaging woman.

And he did it all... he did all this work of grace and love and compassion for the last and the least without ever inquiring about anyone's faith... without ever testing anyone's orthodoxy... without ever asking for a single thing in return or trying to figure out if the person he was caring for deserved what he was doing for them.

.....

So from beginning of it all, from that first lesson on the mount all the way throughout the rest of the gospel, Jesus' ministry sought to reveal a subversive kingdom within this world, and within each of us. A kingdom that only a revolution of sorts could inaugurate.

A revolution that Jesus eventually knew he had to take to all the way to Jerusalem—the epicenter of Jewish life—the great Hebrew capital.

This is where we find him in our lesson today. Like last week, so again this morning, we pick up our lesson this morning with Jesus only having been in Jerusalem for two days. But already, he'd confronted the religious and political leaders. He'd confronted *their* ways with

kingdom ways. He'd dispelled *their* truths with *Gospel* truths... he'd challenged their status quo of politics, church, and society with the revolutionary call to embrace the kingdom of God he had come to reveal.

So already... they were plotting to kill him. And now... all that remained were three days. Three days until he'd no longer be in this world. Three days to ensure his kingdom revolution would live on even without him.

So Jesus offered his followers this one final lesson. This one final story. And to bring it all full circle, he offered it, where else, but atop a mount.

It is here, friends, that we encounter Jesus' masterpiece parable of the time when he will come again in his glory... "And 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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 clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you drink? Or a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and clothed you? And when was it that we saw you sick and in prison and visit you?' 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, you did it to me.'

As he'd said at the start of it all, so he says at the end of it all. The kingdom of God is subversive to this world. So subversive that Jesus says his family, the ones he—our royal King—identifies with aren't the rich and the powerful, but the poor, the sick, the lonely and imprisoned. So much so that when we care for them, he says we do nothing less than care for him.

But notice, if you will, the surprise of the sheep at his right hand. They're stunned to think that they actually cared for Christ when caring for one in need. You see, they weren't offering their care to the least and the last in order to earn God's favor. They were simply living amid the subversive kingdom of God Jesus had revealed. They were living into joyful truth that "to love is to live." And to live is to love.¹

Love not in the sense of some emotional connection. But love in the sense of actively working for another's well-being. That's love, Jesus says. And that's what leads to life in his kingdom. Whether it be his kingdom on earth... or his kingdom in heaven.

.....

So friends, on this Christ the King Sunday—this most political day of the Church's liturgical year—the gospel puts a question before us—the very question Jesus put before his disciples day in and day out.

To what kingdom do we pledge our allegiance?
Whose rules do we pledge to play by?

¹ Rev. John Buchanan, "Pastoral Perspective," James L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2011) 336.

Jesus makes clear, we can pledge our allegiance to the status quo. We can play by the rules of this world where the system is rigged for the powerful every time. We can choose to ignore or deny the cries of harassment reverberating left and right right now, and what that says about society's inherent power structure. We can argue that the church is not the place to examine what the gospel might have to say about gun violence. Just as we can choose for the church's voice to fall silent amid things like the Syrian refugee crisis and the man-made famine facing the Southern Sudanese and Yemen, and the Myanmar cleansing of the Rohingya people. We can choose the rubric that other people's problems aren't our concern. Just as we can determine that the church doesn't have a vital role to play in building bridges of understanding across different communities and cultures. We can choose all of that quite easily. For the world is filled with an endless list of needs, hurts, and crises we can choose to engage or not, from all kinds of varying perspectives.

But we can also choose to align our allegiance with a revolutionary. We can seek that subversive kingdom of heaven even here and now, understanding, as Lindsay Armstrong once wrote, "In a world that seems too big to be changed, our lives have more meaning and value than we imagine."² For as Jesus' story reveals, whatever love we give or don't give... whatever compassion we extend or withhold... affects God's kingdom directly.

In fact, Jesus says we can offer no gift of love too small, no act of compassion too inconsequential as to not touch our King Himself... our subversive, revolutionary king who came to turn the values of the world upside down, and calls us to do the same. Amen.

² Lindsay Armstrong in "Homiletical Perspective," James L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2011) 335.