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Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King

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Paradox

One of my evening rituals is turning on the television when I go to bed. I set the timer for 30 minutes, and then queue up the Hallmark Channel. Because I go to bed at the same time each day, I'm always catching the last 30 minutes of a Hallmark movie.

It's amazing, really, how many of these movies have the same theme: a beautiful young American woman meets a handsome young man. A few days into their romance, she learns that her beau is a Prince, who will shortly become the King of some small nation on another continent. During their 2-week romance, they fall in love.

Then comes the Royal Snub: The Prince is told that he must marry someone of his own peerage, a person born into a royal family. The young couple break up. With 3 or 4 minutes left in the movie, the Prince declares that he will marry for love. And so, another Cinderella story ends happily ever after.

Today's Gospel lesson introduces many paradoxes for us to consider. Jesus describes a King, *God*, sorting people into binary categories: those who will be with God eternally, and those who will not. This passage in Matthew is the last teaching of Jesus before he will begin his Passion. He presents us with a hard lesson *before turning toward the hard, final days in front of him*.

And, today is Christ the King Sunday. It's the last Sunday in our Christian calendar year. This week we consider the reign of Christ...now...in our time—and eschatologically, as in the Gospel reading.

I spent a bit of time thinking about how secular governments measure up to the example of Christ. Human governance has never been particularly stellar. I googled "worst dictatorships in history" and got these fine examples: Caligula (ancient Rome), Cromwell (United Kingdom), Ivan IV (Russia), Genghis Khan (Mongolia). And then, I looked at oppressive governments in the last 100 years. Here's a few examples from Google: Stalin, China, Hitler, Turkey, Tito...and the list goes on.

Our human history invites questions: Does power corrupt? Or do corrupt people seek power? Those questions presuppose an assumption....that power cannot be held without corruption. Yet, this stands in stark contrast to the Kingdom of God, the Reign of Christ, that is now...here...among us. How can these two realities co-exist?

In my hometown, there was one house with the stereotypical white picket fence. A picket fence is made of 3" boards, spaced every 3". When I rode my bicycle past the fence, it appeared to be a solid wall....because, with speed, the gaps between pickets were blurred. Only when I walked past the fence, could I see Mrs. Mimken's front yard. And, if I stopped to visit with her, I could see her garden, grass, flowers.

I think the paradox of Christ's reign coexisting with human governance is like that picket fence. When we're going at our normal, blistering pace, we perceive a solid wall...the human structures of power and injustice. The gaps are blurred by deadlines, mortgage payments, car payments, soccer schedules, all the stuff that drives our daily life. Only when we detach from the busy-ness of life and become still, do we see between the pickets of our lives into the Kingdom of God on Earth. And, we know it's there....

Each time we pray the Lord's prayer, we invite God's kingdom to come, now, as it is in Heaven.

Richard Rohr wrote this observation in his meditations this week:

There are always two worlds. The world *as it is* usually operates on power, ego, and success. The world *as it could be* operates out of love. One is founded on dominative power, and the other is a continual call to right relationship and reciprocal power. The secret of this Kingdom life is discovering how we can live in both worlds simultaneously.

Living in two worlds simultaneously sounds like an unnatural way of being, yet it is the calling of our Baptism.

We are born in the image of God; we are *changed* in Baptism. Baptism is our initiation into the Body of Christ. John Zizioulas wrote, "The baptized person does not simply become a "Christian," as we tend to think, but he becomes a *member of a particular [order]* in the eucharistic community".¹

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to us: 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. These are ministries that reflect the reign of Christ in *this* world.

We minister to the world through our parish, our diocese, our denomination, and the Church—capital C—throughout the world. It is our ministry that reflects the Mystery of Love, the reign of Christ, into this broken world.

As we've journeyed through the Gospel of Matthew this year, we have heard many parables that begin with the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." Even Jesus struggled to find words that could give us a foretaste of Heaven and help us imagine what it might mean for God's will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

The paradox of two realities begins to come into focus next week. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus will begin his Passion and turn toward the Cross. We will begin Advent and turn toward the Manger. These realities cannot exist without each other. Without a manger, there would be no cross. Without a cross, the manger would be empty of Hope.

¹ John D Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*

In the fairy tale world, Prince Charming puts a shoe on Cinderella's foot and he knows she is the one because the shoe fits. A royal shoe that will lift Cinderella into a life of wealth and privilege.

But what about all those people whose foot didn't fit in Prince Charming's shoe? Folks who didn't measure up to some human standard of beauty, belonging, or favored birthright. Our human lens is flawed—even in the genre of fairy tales.

In the Kingdom World, we don't need a royal shoe-maker to measure our feet. We are born in the image of *divine* royalty. We inherit a connection with God that deepens in Baptism. Baptism invites us to a life of simplicity, ministry, worship, loving neighbor, washing feet—of the ones we adore *and* the ones who betray us.

Brother Jim Woodrum² described the paradox of our Eucharistic life in this way:

It is in mirroring the acts of Jesus that we can begin to see the divine image in ourselves and begin to realize our true vocation that was bestowed upon us all those years ago in a beautiful garden: Divine stewards, a royal priesthood, bearing the image of God, granting mercy and reigning in grace.

May your Season of Advent be a time of slowing down, leaning into your Eucharistic Community at St. Martin's, and intentionally looking for the gaps in your picket fence. On the other side of that fence, lies a manger full of welcome, Hope, and Love. Incarnational Love.

² Society of St. John the Evangelist