

Matthew 25:31-46 Pastor Bill Uetrict Christ the King 11/22/20

“Surprise, surprise, surprise!” If you are old enough—say at least 50—you will remember that these words came out of the mouth of the infamous, Gomer Pyle, who appeared initially on the Andy Griffith show and then starred in his own show. Gomer was a Marine who was under the authority of Sergeant Carter, a hard-nosed guy who really struggled with the odd and naïve Gomer. Whenever Gomer was would do something that probably would really irritate Sergeant Carter, Gomer would start the conversation out with, “Surprise, surprise, surprise.”

I suspect that if you want to understand the character of this particular day in the church year, you need to be ready for the biggest surprise of all. Christ the king is amazingly surprising. It will take you to a world that will turn your world upside down.

Now truthfully, the world described by Psalm 95 for today is not all that surprising: “My God is so big, so strong and so mighty; there is nothing that my God cannot do.” I mean, for the most part that is what we think of gods. They are strong. They are mighty. They are in control. Generally, that is our definition of a god. God is associated with bigness. And that’s not a bad thing. It is very healthy for us to know that we are not in control and that we live in light of something much larger and grander than we, a truth, which honestly, is part of the spirit of Christ the King Sunday. In many ways, that spirit is really a source of good news. As we get lost in the morass of these days, we need something that will raise us above it all, that will put things in perspective. We need to hear, and probably trust, the expected news that God is God, and we aren’t.

Our reading from Ephesians takes us to the big, 30,000-foot-view as well. Here one of Paul’s followers speaks of God’s great power, which he says God put to work when he raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. This is king talk. The raised Jesus, now given the title “Christ,” is ruling, is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” Whew! Big stuff! Big stuff for people who would be living in the shadow of supposed authorities who loved to intimidate,

governmental leaders who took themselves exceedingly seriously, and their subjects not so seriously. Christ is bigger than all those bossy folks. Christ is king, not Caesar.

Again, at least initially and simply at first consideration, that isn't too surprising. We often associate our religion with power and dominion, so much so that in portions of our history we took our flags and our Christs and tried to convince people that they needed to become like us, needed to submit to Christ the king. It's this that some people in our day think of as Christian faith. It's this that they protest when they say, "You're trying to push that Jesus down my throat, force your religion on me." While I don't think Ephesians is about forcing anything, the notion of God as power, as above all things probably isn't too surprising.

When you confront our first reading for today, you probably aren't surprised by Ezekiel's preoccupation with those in positions of power--shepherds, he calls them, meaning the kings of his day. We're often preoccupied with leaders. In today's text, God is really ticked off that the leaders of his day aren't doing justice and that they have scattered people in every direction. God in God's godness and bigness says that he himself is going to take over the job. He himself will search for his sheep and rescue them. The folks in charge—they are only feeding themselves, getting fat and happy off of the people on the bottom.

Whoa! Here we are starting to move into something that is a little surprising. The God of the universe, the true king of the people of Israel, the one who is boss of it all isn't consumed with himself, his own power; he's consumed with the ones who can easily be not paid attention to, especially by those who are in charge. Listen to God's words: "I myself will be the shepherd of *my* sheep, and I will make them lie down. I will seek the lost, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." Wow! "But the fat and the strong I will destroy!" Wow! This God is not obsessed with power or wealth. This God has a heart for the vulnerable, for the weak, for the folks not in charge.

Matthew in our gospel lesson for today tells us the familiar parable about sheep and goats. For me, what is intriguing to note in this story is the great surprise that both the sheep and the goats experience when the judging Son of Man tells them that they did or did not respond to his real needs. “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or imprisoned?” they both ask. The response from the Son of Man was, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers or sisters, you did it to me.”

Huh? What? The Son of Man is the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the stranger. Surprise! Surprise! Surprise! The one who is given the big authority to judge is the one discovered, met in those who are in need, those who are vulnerable. The great judgment of the world is not based on whether people say, “Lord, Lord,” speak the right theology, carry their Bibles, defend God in the public square, tame their naughtiness, take Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, memorize Bible passages, or vote for the right candidate. The great judgment of the world is based on how people and the nations respond to those in need and those who are vulnerable because those in need, those who are vulnerable are Jesus.

Surprise! Surprise! Surprise! Christ the King, the one who rules over all is the one who thirsts, who hungers, who is imprisoned, who, we will see in the next chapters of Matthew, is dying. The one who rules rules from the cross. The one in charge is the vulnerable one. Wow! Who would have expected that? Who would have linked God with need? Isn't God the all-sufficient one? Isn't God the one who needs nothing?

Apparently not! God has a penchant for those in need. It's a whole new world then. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the mourning. Bless are the meek. Blessed are those who are in need. Blessed are the vulnerable. Life then is not about running from our own need or the needs of others. Life is about embracing our own vulnerability and embracing the vulnerable of the world. When Christ is king, the judgment has to do not with how boldly religious we are or how we control life or other people, but rather how we let go of life, let go of ourselves for the sake of others, how we respond to those in need, those who are vulnerable.

You know who the vulnerable are. They are the poor, the folks in nursing homes, the forgotten elderly, the abandoned and abused children, the lonely. They are the folks now in our hospitals, connected to ventilators. They are the doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals who are wearing themselves thin and risking their lives to serve Covid patients.

Of course, we will wear masks. Of course, we will observe social distancing. Of course, we will limit the size of our gatherings. That's what people do who care for the vulnerable. That's what people do who are able to get over themselves to respond to those who are in need. For us who worship Christ the King, it will not be about "rights," but rather, love of neighbor.

Now, I hope that is no surprise to you. Really, it shouldn't be anything new. Love of neighbor has been what we have been about forever. Love is what invites us to sing to the Lord, to come into his presence with thanksgiving. Love is what raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at the right hand of God in the heavenly places. Love is what drives God to butt heads with the kings who disregard the vulnerable. Love is what is at stake as the nations are judged. Love runs the universe. Love, then, is our calling.