

25th Sunday after Pentecost / ***Christ the King*** Sunday – **November 22, 2009**

2 Samuel 23: 1-7; Revelation 1: 4b-8; John 18: 33-38a

PAPER SUNDAY

Jesus is the only king and head of the church – this is what we celebrate today on what is called *Christ the King* or *Reign of Christ* Sunday. Jesus is king – *the alpha and the omega* – the truth standing right in front of Pilate – the ruler of all rulers – the one whom we have pledged to follow and to serve. Although this image of king comes to us from the scripture the naming of this special feast day in the life of the church did not come until the twentieth century when Pope Pius XI realized that the church needed to promote the image of *Christ the King* to combat the frightening images of the world. It was the time of Mussolini and Hitler – a time of rising dictators and false values – a time when it was crucial for believers to remember that, despite what the propaganda machine said, Christ is King of the universe and Christ needed to remain king in their hearts.

The feast of *Christ the King* – *Reign of Christ* Sunday – was then and is now a reminder of what is most important in our lives. The king imagery is designed to make a statement about life's fundamental questions in the broken times of the past and of the present. Who exercises dominion over whom? Who or what rules our days and how? Who or what dominates our culture? Who rules in our life?

Greed, pride, selfishness, and fear motivate much of the world. These forces rule in our culture – in every nation of this world. The pursuit of personal happiness – the pursuit of individual success – the pursuit of private wellbeing at any cost – if these things are first-and-foremost in our lives then Christ is not. If Christ is not on top – is he truly king?

There is an episode of the popular sitcom, *Friends*, in which Chandler questions his wife Monica, about where he stands in importance. By choosing a new job in New York at the same time that Chandler has been relocated to Kansas City, she seems to have shifted him down the priority list. [Old job – Chandler – new job] As the story unfolds and comes to its predictably happy conclusion. Monica assures Chandler that he not only remains at the top of her list, but he is far above all other considerations. [Old job – new job – Chandler]

We announce Christ as our king. What does our priority list look like? [Friends – job – church – family – Jesus – our own life – the life of a loved one?] We believe that Jesus is the King of kings – the fulfillment of the covenant made with David forever to have one of his heirs sitting on the cosmic throne. God was in Christ – reconciling the world – Jesus is King. Christians have our home base already confirmed – the foundation of our being established – Christ the king – Christ who reigns – Christ as supreme influence. When we remember where our center is, who our center is, the other things that want to claim our attention and allegiance don't so easily distract us. We know who we are and whose we are. We know who leads us in the decisions we make, in the paths we choose, in the lives we live. What does your priority list look like? Can people tell that Christ is your king by the life you lead and the choices you make?

I believe that if we think about this honestly we may be uncomfortable with the answers we discover. Perhaps power and position in our workplace or in the church is the most important thing to us. Perhaps financial security is paramount. Perhaps staying alive at any cost is what motivates our every decision. Perhaps pleasing others or achieving success in school ranks as most significant.

Not only is Christ our king but the gospel message reminds us that we are members one of another in a kingdom that is not of this world – we not only belong to God we belong to, and are responsible to, one another. This is what the church is – a community of faith under the leadership of Jesus – part of one another and accountable to one another. Today, as we remember and affirm Christ at the top of our priority list, I need to talk to you as a part of this community of faith – to increase the accountability we have for one another and for the church. I need to talk to you about money.

No doubt, some of you think I have no business talking to you about money. In the church “personal finances” distract us and so we become suspicious or defensive if an elder – a teaching elder like me, or one of the ruling elders of the session – raises questions about financial giving patterns to the church. We don’t like to think that the choices we make as families or individuals might in any way ever be the church’s business. I beg to differ. Because we are citizens of the kingdom of God – followers of Christ – we are in business together!

In my first year of seminary one of my professors, the Reverend Dr. Nancy Cocks, counseled us – students preparing for ministry and leadership in congregations – advised us about how we could approach talking with our community of faith about money and giving to the church. She said that she learned early on that if you want to speak with conviction about financial stewardship you had better give with conviction also! That day changed the way I approached money in relationship to the church. I realized that if I expected others to give sacrificially I had best learn to do it myself. If I expect others to talk honestly and openly about how to make decisions regarding the amount they offer to the church, I would need to do so as well. I am willing – any day – any time – to speak with individuals or groups about money because I try to give in a way that recognizes the kingship of Christ in my life.

Some days I think I give *enough* – whatever that means. Looking over the giving patterns of Knox, I am certain that some of you give generously and others do not give enough – some of you give nothing at all. I am frankly glad that I don’t know who is who in that list but since we are in business together we do need to boost the accountability on occasion.

I experienced just such a bump in accountability on my recent trip to Malawi. Does it surprise you that I would learn much about giving generously to the church in one of the poorest countries in the world? It not only surprises, it shocks me that people with almost nothing have so much to teach those of us in Canada who live lives of plenty. Even those of you who plead poverty and “fixed-income” and “uncertain futures” are secure and wealthy by worldly standards – we are immune it seems to the abundance with which we have been blessed.

I had the privilege to attend a *Paper Sunday* at a church in Phalombe while in Malawi. Ed and Jackie Hoekstra were attending worship there on our first Sunday in Africa and they agreed to take Beth MacIntosh and I along with them to the service in this community two hours southeast of Blantyre. We needed to be there by 9:00am so we left early and traveled along dusty, bumpy, narrow roads to this isolated spot. Ed and Jackie warned us that it was a *Paper Sunday* so it might be a bit long but Beth and I were eager for the experience.

Paper Sunday happens about four times a year in most Malawian CCAP congregations. It is a special giving Sunday – a day when people who usually may only be able to afford a few coins make an effort to offer 10, 20, 50 and even larger Kwacha notes – paper money. It is a day when the abundance with which people have been blessed is celebrated and shared and honored in the name of Christ, the King. Here is what happens...

I missed the very beginning of the offering part of the service we attended because it began after the singing and scripture and prayers and preaching at 12:00 noon – about 2.5 hours after the service started – and I desperately needed to use the *chimbutzi*. Jackie Hoekstra and I were directed by one of the helpful women to the local facilities and returned as the first offering was being completed. I took my 500 Kwacha note (under 5 dollars) and put it into the basket. Imagine my amazement when the usher asked if I would like change! I said no but reconsidered that decision later in the afternoon!

The clerk of session began announcing community leaders and representatives from other congregations who had made donations or commitments to the Phalombe Church. Apparently, it is common practice for each congregation to support the work of other congregations, recognizing that we are all citizens of God's kingdom no matter our choice of denomination or Kirk. He not only gave their name and encouraged them to stand, he publicized the amount they gave – how would you like that? The information was all recorded by a team of counters gathered at the front of the sanctuary. It seems strange to us for givings to be so public but, I am reminded by Hope Stenton, not so many years ago when she was a child in her father's church the record of each family's offering was printed in the annual report.

Next, those counting the offering were invited forward to make their special offering. No solemn queue for the Malawians – they danced their way past the large baskets, tossing in their paper money with joy! Music played loudly throughout the process and just when I thought it couldn't get any wilder a master of ceremonies replaced the clerk of session. He was truly amazing – a charismatic, gospel style preacher calling on people to remember how God had blessed them and to give sacrificially in Christ's name. My 500 Kwacha donation felt a bit meager all of a sudden and I could hardly wait until I had another opportunity to contribute. Ed and Jackie assured Beth and me we would have another chance once a special auction took place so we watched with interest, as the following scene was prepared...

Some members of the congregation brought a loveseat into the front of the church and covered it with fancy cloths. Then they positioned a table in front of the sofa and a lamp to one side. They decorated the table with flowers and placed a tray of drinks on it. Now the bidding could begin. They auctioned a chance to sit in this honored place to the highest bidder – couples would sit in the comfy spot as *Mr. and Mrs. Paper Sunday* and take a drink

or two before being ousted by someone offering more money. Remember we had all been sitting on cement or wooden benches in thirty degree temperatures for several hours – no food and, except for those of us lucky enough to bring bottled water, nothing to drink either. Beth and I got into the fun after the Hoekstras paid enough for a turn on the couch and we were the final bidders, becoming *Mrs. and Mrs. Paper Sunday!*

Now *Paper Sunday* could begin in earnest! Many people were called forward to fling their paper money into the baskets:

- session members and deacons (what we call members of the Board of Managers)
- members of the various women's guild groups (*Mvano*)
- everyone with a car in the parking lot had their license number announced so that they could contribute more – obviously they had plenty because they could afford a vehicle
- *allendo* (visitors) were invited to make an additional contribution – we could afford to travel
- men wearing jackets had another opportunity too

It went on and on – until about 3:00 in the afternoon when the session clerk ended the event with a blessing. Three hours of giving from some of the poorest people you could meet on earth – it was amazing. It was also humbling. I am used to mindfully measuring out my tithe to the church – carefully counting the cost – but here I was tossing bill after bill into a basket – knowing I would never get a receipt – dancing and laughing and singing. The experience has helped boost my own sense of accountability – the community of faith in Malawi reminded me that we are under the leadership of Jesus together – part of one another and accountable to one another for where the church and the kingship of Jesus sits in the priority list.

I realize now that I probably don't give *enough* – I don't know if I ever could – but I continue to think about how I can give in a less restrained way. We all get distracted and allow what is important to be sidelined from time to time. This fall I learned about giving with greater freedom and joy. I gained understanding of new ways to share my wealth and came home hoping you could share in the enthusiasm I was part of on that *Paper Sunday* in the warm heart of Africa. Today we can contemplate the place of Jesus in our lives and ask ourselves if people could tell Christ is king in our hearts by the decisions we make in all aspects of our lives – including our financial stewardship. Together we are – disciples – citizens of the kingdom of God – followers of Christ, the King. **Amen.**