

Today we are celebrating Christ the King Sunday, or as it's also known, Reign of Christ Sunday. Today is a day all about Jesus, where we celebrate his life and ministry and the power he has in our world. Reign of Christ is also the last Sunday in the church calendar year before we move into the season of Advent, and the new year itself, at least church-wise.

I think we will find plenty of reasons to celebrate the end of this calendar year too. 2020 has been an AWFUL lot, and we are ready and willing to turn a fresh page. Though we will never really move on completely from everything that's happened this year - time may move on but it the seasons leave their marks on us. This is especially true with the pandemic. The pandemic will have lasting effects on us for years to come, if not for the rest of our lives. And so even though we are ready to welcome in a new marker of a year, there are elements of this current year that will remain with us and influence how that new year is to come.

So this phenomenon is true in the church year as well. We end the year by celebrating everything Jesus - Jesus' reign in our world, Jesus' holy power as the King of Kings, the life-saving gift that Jesus himself is to us all. And as we turn to a new church year in Advent, we know that Jesus is the holy King of Kings, the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. And this reality of Jesus that we celebrate sets the stage for Advent, the season of anticipation in which we wait for Jesus' birth on Christmas. Advent is about waiting and hoping, watching and praying, and remembering the love, joy, peace, and hope that Jesus brings us.

So as we celebrate Jesus today on Reign of Christ Sunday, and read these powerful Bible stories, what do we learn about Jesus? What do we now know about who Jesus is, and in turn, who God is, in the midst of these Words?

We learn that Jesus is a teacher. Jesus is the inspirer of God-given actions. And Jesus is for all people.

The things that Jesus teaches his disciples, and in turn, us, in today's Gospel lesson are straightforward and beautiful ways to live out the commands to love God and love neighbors. Jesus praises the people who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. Whenever we see folks who are struggling in these tangible ways, it is part of our Christian calling to do what we can to care for them, to make the love we have for our neighbors real. Whenever we are hungry or a stranger or sick, the food and care and welcome we receive is what keeps us alive. There is no more basic function to love our neighbors than to do what we can to keep them alive. And there are many ways in which we can support these actions to which Jesus calls us and teaches us how to do. Sometimes that's an immediate interaction of sharing your food with someone who is hungry. Sometimes that's volunteering in various ministries, like the Food Shelf or with the Backpack Program or bringing food for the Grace Place meal. And sometimes it's caring deeply about the people who have nowhere to be welcomed, to reach out and invite someone into conversation or relationship. Jesus teaches us that all these things are how we bring the kingdom of heaven closer, when we act in service towards our neighbors. So we take these lessons to heart and they are beautiful ways that we learn how to love God and the people around us well. Receiving these actions of love from others changes and saves lives every single day too. It only takes one story of someone being welcomed into a new community or receiving a desperately-needed warm meal to inspire us in service. Thank you, Jesus.

And there are also parts of Jesus that are perhaps less comfortable for us to recognize, more fearful rather than inspirational. We cannot read this text and ignore some pretty intense language, namely the separation of the sheep from the goats, and accursed and "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels". How can the God of love also be God of the separation and judgment of goats and sheep?

Throughout these last few months' Gospel texts particularly, we can't deny that judgment is part of who Jesus is and how Jesus works in the world. But we also learn that it is not on us to provide the judgment of one

another. We are not the ones who determine what God's reign or heavenly kingdom are like. We are not the ones who are meant to be separating each other into goats and sheep in this story and placing that type of judgment on one another will do nothing but further separate us. That is one part of 2020 that I am particularly ready to leave behind - the painful and hateful and cruel rhetoric of people so divided it breaks our hearts in two as well. If we get caught up in avoiding being a goat or labelling others as a goat, in worshipping the false idol of judgment, we don't see the sheep to which we belong. The sheep to which we are called and taught to tangibly love.

Judgment is not ours to give. Judgment comes from God. In the Gospel story, it is the Son of Man, God, by way of Jesus, who separates the goats from the sheep.

In the Ezekiel text today, we learn that it is God, through the words of the prophet, who says, "I myself will judge. I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. I will bring them out from the peoples, and I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." God is the one who tends the sheep, who seeks us out and by God's power and action alone does any sort of judgment happen. It is God himself who chooses to dwell among us and knows that we are not perfect, and yet chooses to love us anyway, unconditionally. The choices that come from judgment are not ours to make, but rather we must make the choice to lean into the love and grace so freely given to us by God, that we must share with one another. That is the reign of Jesus, that there is always love and grace for all people, including us, including us sinners, and we are free from any powers that would threaten to separate us from the love of God.

Knowing that judgment is from God alone also inspires us, it gives us hope when we believe and proclaim that the love of Jesus is not conditional on us meeting certain standards of being the sheep, one way or another. God's love made human in Jesus Christ is truly for all people, by God's powerful mercy and grace and forgiveness that surpasses our understanding. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians,

“God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.”

Jesus' power lives and reigns within us even now. Jesus reigns above any rule or authority or power or dominion. Jesus reigns not only back in the first-century Roman Empire but for all ages to come. Jesus reigns here and now. Jesus is the King of Kings who was and is and is to come. Jesus is for us, for all people, for all of creation, and for this reign, we give unending thanks and praise. Let us learn, be inspired, and share the Good News of Jesus Christ in all we do. Thanks be to God, Amen.