

“Christ the King”
1 Colossians 1:11-20

As we think of Christ as king, it is hard for us today to relate to that image when we don't have too many kings in our world. We hear about kings and queens in fairy tales. Of course there is the queen of England, but she is really not a full queen. It is just a ceremonial position. So, how can we fully understand the kingship of Jesus Christ, if we don't have anything to compare it with from our own experience? Well, as I researched, I found a helpful resource about a famous king: Yertle the Turtle.

Yertle the Turtle

On the far-away Island of Sala-ma-Sond, Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond. A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat. The water was warm. There was plenty to eat. The turtles had everything turtles might need. And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed. They were until Yertle, the king of them all, decided the kingdom he ruled was too small.

So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand. And Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command. He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone. And, using these turtles, he built a new throne. He made each turtle stand on another one's back, and he piled them all up in a nine-turtle stack. And then Yertle climbed up. He sat down on the pile. What a wonderful view! He could see 'most a mile! "All mine!" Yertle cried. "Oh, the things I now rule! I'm king of a cow! And I'm king of a mule! I'm king of a house! And, what's more, beyond that, I'm king of a blueberry bush and a cat! I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me! For I am the ruler of all that I see!" And this king kept making his throne higher and higher until he finally tumbled down and made everyone miserable.

Although Yertle the Turtle is not a real king, he is very close to real kings in his love for power and control. He can help us understand pretty accurately what a real king is like. In fairy tales, we idealize kings and queens. Yet as history shows us, the average length of a reign for a queen or a king is only 3 to 4 years. And for the most part, royalty has had a violent, murderous history throughout the centuries. The king normally serves no one. The king is served by all. Even kids know that.

Just how did the carpenter from Nazareth come to be regarded as a king? During Jesus' public life, the title King of the Jews belonged to Herod, the puppet king set up by the Roman occupiers (Lk 23:6-12). Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus claim this title for himself. In fact, it was used to mock him while he was hanging on the cross. It was probably not until several years after his resurrection that Christians began to apply that title to him. Why? One of the tasks of the early Christian teachers was to show that Jesus was indeed the fulfillment of the religious expectations of the Jewish people. They did this by placing him squarely at the heart of some of Israel's major religious traditions. By means of a genealogy, his ancestry is traced back to David, regarded as the ideal king. Today's reading from Colossians reminds us of this kingship.

So, if we are to look at Jesus as our king, we need a major redefinition of that word. The passage in Colossians 1 is a song of praise for Christ with beautiful language. Yet, it is one of those scriptures that we have to interpret by looking at the historical context of Jesus' earthly life. We need to look at the passage in Colossians in light of the passage in Luke 23 because the kingship of Jesus was not an ethereal matter or was not something to be understood from our human perspective. His subversive kingship/kingdom is what led him to the cross.

Jesus is the servant king. Jesus was not and is not a king who rules through raw power, greed and manipulation at the expense of others. He did not conscript any army to dominate the minds and hearts of people by force. He lived and modeled a far different style of leadership in life among his people. Christ as king rules by suffering, vulnerable love, not by domination. This king teaches us that God's power is made perfect in weakness. This king teaches us that God chooses what is foolish to shame what the world thinks is wise. This king teaches us that God chooses what is weak to shame what the world thinks is strong. Jesus had tried to let his disciples in on that the first time he told them about his death. "If you want to save your life, you will lose it. If you lose your life for my sake, you will save it."

So, what if we truly followed this kind of king? What kind of mission would he be sending us on? I believe that the first thing we are invited to is learning to let go of our agendas and be open to God's work. We are called to learn the practice of self-emptying in order to be open to God's Spirit in us. Our agendas often stand in the way of our full discipleship. Father Thomas Keating, a Catholic priest and teacher, talks about our "emotional programs for happiness." All of us are born into this world innocent and dependent on the care of our parents, yet somewhere along the way, between birth and age 4 we develop triggers for happiness or unhappiness in response to the circumstance of our lives. We develop an illusion as to what true happiness is, craving to find happiness in the wrong places. For example, when we are deprived of affection intentionally or unintentionally, we become attached to the need to be loved. There is nothing wrong with our need for love, what is hard is having our happiness be dependent on always receiving it from others. According to Keating, these triggers or programs for happiness fall under three major categories:

1. *Control or power*: Most of us have met or know someone in our lives who is into control and power. They try very hard to control every situation in their lives. Yet, as Keating puts it, "they are programmed for human misery because they are competing with 7 billion people who are trying to do the same impossible thing."
2. *Affection or esteem*: This is when you see someone who seeks the attention and love of all of those who are around them. Again, these people are destined to fail because it is impossible to be liked by everyone. I have a dear friend in Oregon who used to tell me about how she manipulated people in order to get their affection. She gave them presents and desperately tried to get their love.
3. *Security*: This is when you see someone holding on so tightly to their money or other sources of security. Their happiness is dependent on controlling life's circumstances which cannot be controlled: illness, death, loss of jobs are things that happen to all of us and no one is immune.

Some of us have tendencies towards one or two of these programs. Some of us are not even aware of them. Some of you might be sitting here and thinking of other people in your life and how they have these issues. You might even be thinking of getting a copy of the sermon to give to them, but the bad news is that we all have these emotional programs, whether we realize it or not. The good news is that these programs don't have to control us because we can ask for God's grace to help us diminish their power over us. This is the work of our faith journey. It is not easy because it requires a lot of intentional work to be open to God's healing. During Advent, we will focus each week on one practice or question to learn to be open to God's work in us. Today, I invite you to pay attention during the week to your interactions with others, especially any interactions that leave you with negative feelings. If you are able, write those down. Maybe you will see some patterns. This work is serious because it always frees us to serve God and others in the world instead of focusing on serving ourselves. I would like to tell you a story today of someone who knew how to empty herself for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"My name is Corrie Ten Boom. I was the daughter of a Dutch watchmaker during World War II. When the war started, our Prime Minister promised that we were going to be OK. But life was never the same after the war began. Our streets were filled with German soldiers. We were restricted in the times we could go out and come in. I had to let go of all of my activities. Then the German soldiers also began to smash the windows of shops owned by Jewish people and steal the goods inside. Sometimes the Jewish shopkeepers and their families disappeared as well. At the time, no one knew what happened to them. One day there was an order for all the Jewish people in Holland to report to the police. They were told that they must wear a bright yellow star, the "Star of David", on their clothes, wherever they went. On a rainy day in November 1941, some German soldiers broke into a fur shop across the road from our home. It was owned by a Jew called Mr. Weil. The soldiers smashed the windows and took all the furs. Then they threw Mr. Weil's clothes into the street. I ran outside and brought Mr. Weil into our home. From that day on, we kept on hiding Jews in our home. Our house was very old, with all kinds of unexpected corners and spaces in it. We did this until I was arrested and put into prison in 1944. I really didn't care what happened to us because I knew that is what Jesus would have done. My king wore a crown of thrones and died on a cross, I just followed his example!" Amen.