

The Reign of Christ

November 24, 2019

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 1:68-79; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

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A few winters ago, we had some serious plumbing problems at my house. A pipe burst in an outside wall and my booster pump froze up and then died. We were lucky enough to get a plumber out the next day.

There we were, the plumber and me, shivering in my backyard, getting wet in 3-degree weather, struggling to unfreeze the pump when the plumber learned that I'm a pastor.

He talked a bit about the church he attended and how long he'd been going there, that he was a deacon and a Sunday School teacher; suddenly he stopped working, stood up with a wrench in his hand and said, ***"Preacher can I ask you a question?"*** *"Certainly, what is it?"*

He looked off into the distance; then he turned and squinted at me and said, ***"This here Hitler fellow; If - before he died, he was to have told God he was sorry and all, would God have forgiven him? Would Hitler get to go to heaven?"***

I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but even I knew this was a question the plumber had been carrying around for a very long time; that he had probably asked his own pastor, had not gotten the answer he wanted, and now he was coming to me for a second opinion, and the question wasn't really about Hitler – it was about something, or someone, else.

Cautiously I said, *"Well, if Hitler was truly repentant, and only God knows that, but if he were truly repentant, then the answer is yes, God would forgive him."*

The plumber's face turned red, he threw down the wrench he was holding, and spat out loudly and vehemently, ***"But, that's not fair. It's just not fair! It's like them fellers that lives like hell their whole lives, then at the last minute they get sorry and get saved and then it's all right. It's just not fair, I tell you."***

Somewhere in our heart or mind, we agree with him, don't we? It really doesn't seem fair. In the world we live in, bad behavior usually results in punitive consequences.

Though people can and do disagree about what exactly constitutes bad behavior and what the precise consequences should be, as a general principle, we, as a country, agree that the pursuit of justice is good, and we are appalled when bad people "get off," are not punished for their evil deeds. Like my plumber friend, we often think – ***"But, that's not fair."***

Listen again to the Gospel Lesson: ³⁹ *One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding^[e] him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah?^[f] Save yourself and us!"*

⁴⁰ *But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"* ⁴¹ *And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴² *Then he said, "Jesus,*

remember me when you come into^[g] your kingdom.”⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Say it with me? ***"But that's not fair!"***

Today is known as Christ the King Sunday - or, more often in recent years, as Reign of Christ Sunday. Either way, the day is intended to remind us of two things.

1) As Christians, we live in ***two kingdoms***, or two worlds, or two universes of meaning, at the same time. In his book “The Canadians” Andrew Malcolm writes about Cecille Bechard: She is “A Canadian who visits the United States several dozen times a day; when she goes to the refrigerator or to the backdoor or to make tea for instance. To read and sleep, she stays in Canada. And she eats there too, at the north end of her kitchen table. Mrs. Bechard’s home is in Quebec and Maine at the same time.” This is because her house was already there in 1842 when diplomats sat down in London to create the official boundary line.

Like Mrs. Bechard, we are citizens of one "realm" who spend most of our time in another "realm," all the while staying in the same place. Most of our life is lived in the urgent now of eating and sleeping and working and playing. Most of our thinking is governed by the culture in which we live; indeed, most of our opinions about most things are shaped by being citizens of and participants in the secular world around us.

But, to be a person of faith is to perceive another reality besides the one that is easily and readily apparent. To be a person of faith is to live in two worlds at the same time. To be a person of faith is to perceive the reality everyone else sees but to also see a reality that can only be seen with the eyes of faith, what Ephesians calls, ***"the eyes of the heart enlightened."***

The first truth Reign of Christ Sunday calls us to is that we do indeed live in two worlds.

2) **The second truth is that the rules are different in the Kingdom of God.** What's fair and not fair within the reign of Christ is determined by a different set of criteria. Or, more accurately: in the face of the fierce love shown by Christ upon the cross, what's fair and unfair doesn't really matter anymore. It wasn't fair for an innocent Jesus to be tried, tortured, crucified. It wasn't fair for a guilty, yet sorrowful, man like the second criminal – to be welcomed into Paradise just as readily as a lifelong good person. Say it with me? ***"But that's not fair!"***

We are all in favor of forgiveness when it comes to our sins; after all, they are such little things – peccadillos, bad habits really, excusable character flaws, wouldn't you say? But, those other people! How could God forgive them for doing those things they do? How can God not only forgive them, but expect us to forgive and love and help them too.

I met Bp. Gordy in the summer after his first year in seminary. (*More about that after lunch,*) I have watched his work in his parishes, in the Synod, in the ELCA, in the community. And one thing has been a consistent driver of his life and ministry – he lives by the kingdom ethic of seeing everyone as a beloved child of God and acting accordingly – always and without fail, day in and day out, for over 30 years.

Which is why everywhere he served ministries like homeless shelters, and emergency relief programs, training programs to get people back to work, advocacy for immigration issues, etc. etc. have been created.

This is not because Julian is such a great guy, though he is that, but because he not only received and accepted the grace of God for himself, but he allowed the grace of God, the kingdom of God, the reign of Christ, *to be **THE** controlling factor in his life*. When God's kingdom takes over, lives are changed, and we are empowered to change the lives of others.

The fact that God loves us that much and that unconditionally is the mystery, and the magnificence, of the Gospel. And most of us only occasionally catch a fleeting glimpse of it.

More often, we are like my plumber, more interested in human fairness than we are in divine mercy, more worried about being justly rewarded for our efforts than we are in allowing God's unmerited and amazing grace to wash over us, and forgive us, and change us, and through us - everyone around us.

This day you will be with me in Paradise, Jesus said,

Say it with me – *"But that's not fair!"*

No, it's not - but it is wonderful and it is the gospel.

Amen and amen.