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Grace, River Forest  
Christ the King- Year B  
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*The Truth of it All*

Jesus Christ, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Before him, wounds and all, every knee will bend.

One of the highlights of the past year was our summer road trip to Saskatchewan. This particular trip coincided with a family reunion for Ole's moms side of the family. The Austinson's- who immigrated from Norway and eventually found themselves on the Canadian prairies. The most memorable part of the weekend came when the talent show was interrupted by Ole's cousin, who invited the two of us to come up front. There he mentioned how because of the pandemic most of the family couldn't come to our wedding, and so they wanted to celebrate with us and welcome me into the family, and so he brought out a kransekake cake (traditionally made for weddings), decorated with both Norwegian and Pride flags. There, in the midst of so many incarnate signs of love- in word and action- I knew I was welcomed. I belong here. These are my people now too.

A sense of belonging can crack open expansive space in our hearts and imaginations. Room to move and grow. Trust. A gift that brings lightness and confidence. Belonging breeds boldness.

Belonging is a fickle thing though. To what or to whom do we belong? We spend so much time and energy trying to find our place, often failing and faltering along the way.

We are in the midst of a courtroom conversation between Jesus and Pilate. The truth of it all is that the Ancient One that Daniel prophesied about is the Human One, and the alpha and omega from Revelation is the one standing for questioning. As confounding as it is, he speaks plainly. "My kingdom is not from here, if it were my followers would be fighting to protect it." It is not as you might expect. Hours from this moment it will become even more clear. His kingship shall never be destroyed and yet it is fully revealed on the throne of his cross. He does not protect his life, he gives it away. Is not defensive but gives himself up on his own accord. He exercises his authority not by fighting back in retaliation but by bestowing forgiveness and mercy upon all who are tired and weighed down. Even those who ridiculed him. The ruler of the kings of earth is the crucified one- arms outstretched in welcome embrace. Wide open. Vulnerable, powerful. His rule is both glorious and gentle.

Jesus says, everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Pilate's response, in exasperation "what is truth."

You might have noticed the blue tape on the floor in the chancel. That means that Christmas Eve rehearsal has begun during the school day at Grace. School children learn the carols that begin the service as they have for countless decades. The service begins with them singing in the shape of a cross. And the blue tape is there to show them where to stand. I have heard students and alumni over the years talk about what it means for them to find their place in the cross.

The truth is that the ruler of the kings of earth is and always will be the crucified one. we wear his insignia, royal seal upon our brow- our bodies indelibly marked with the cross. our own coat of arms. This is where we belong. That truth- in flesh and blood, is a home for us. No competing for space here. Broad and flexible enough for all of us to stretch out and rest. Quite a kingdom- cruciform, capacious, porous, hungry filled, lowly lifted high, slain lamb at the center, justice given, mercy found, sinners forgiven. Outlasts all empires and tyrants. Reign is forever.

As Ole's cousin spoke I knew I could trust him. Same with Jesus as he echoes through time from cross to empty tomb and beyond. pushing forward. We listen to his voice. It leads us into abundant life. Beckoning us into the generative geography of grace. By faith our ears are attuned to it as it resounds in ten thousand places. We know what it sounds like.

For me, his voice sounded like a mentor of mine, whose words came to me in the midst of my own despair after I had failed to meet my own expectations again. Ole reminded me of the testimony of Pastor Paul Palumbo who I got to know in Lake Chelan, Washington. He writes about the ego's constant need to maintain a certain kind of image and defend itself even to ridiculous lengths. He frames all of it in light of the death of our old self still obsessed with all of that, and finding new life in Christ. I listened and found freedom in the wide and unencumbered landscape outside of the confines of my own narrow self. I found my place in the cross again. Got to find that blue tape. There we find room to see our neighbor beside us and hear what they have to say. What a relief. As Luther writes, "we ought to use our liberty to empty ourselves in order to serve our neighbors in every way, for this is the manner in which God in Christ continues to act toward us."

When our king sets a feast there is no kransekake cake, but staple food and festive drink. Elements that come forth from the earth. A little bread and a sip of wine. Gifts more extravagant than all the world's treasure. Yours for free. No strings attached. Hear his voice: this is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for you. Come. Listen. Dwell. It's where you belong.

