

Sermon – Luke 23:33-43
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Grace Lutheran Church
Christ the King – Year C
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“The King of Life and Love”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It had fit just the night before. Of that, I was sure. I had taken off my wedding ring, setting in on the nightstand in the guest bedroom where we were staying. But when I picked it up in the early-grey morning, I could not for the life of me put it on. My knuckle, it seemed, had grown in the night. Perhaps I had been transmogrified in my sleep, becoming a mythic beast or a marvelous superhero. Had I wound up in a Kafkaesque plot? Fallen victim to jesting jewelers in the night? Perhaps I had simply had too much to eat. Try as I might, and I kept at it for a while. I could not get the ring on my finger. I finally gave up, rolled over, and fell into an uneasy sleep. Waking up again a while later, in the full light of morning, I looked at the nightstand and saw not one but two wedding rings, identical in everything but diameter. I had been trying to put on Erika's ring. It had not been made to fit me, nor I for it.
2. It is uncomfortable, disappointing, when things don't fit the way we feel they should. By the time we reach today's section of Jesus' passion, things that looked to be fitting together were instead falling apart. Where once his followers imagined there might be a crown and a throne, Jesus is left instead with thorns and a cross. All had seemed so hopeful just a few days earlier as he entered triumphantly into Jerusalem. Why not march all the way to Rome? His opponents were worried about precisely that and put him to death to maintain the political status quo. Having accomplished this mission they

mock him, both with their own words and with a sign. This man, a king? In the end, it just wouldn't work with the narratives of this world. A king like Jesus doesn't fit.

3. The problem, of course, is not with Jesus. It is with us, we who have twisted notions about kingship and power. Jesus has been clear all along about the Kingdom he comes to bring. He makes it, in fact, the centerpiece of the prayer he teaches his disciples. What do we ask of God? That's God's Kingdom come, God's will be done. This, by the way, is not asking God for two different things; it is saying the same thing twice. For what is God's reign if not the instantiation of God's will? And what is God's will? Jesus goes on to tell us: daily bread, forgiveness of sins, protection from evil. These things, not domination and subjugation, are the power and the glory by which God's Kingdom is known. In God's reign, access to food is not manipulated for political gain; food and all that this is necessary for daily life is abundantly available to all. In God's reign, retribution and revenge make way for reconciliation and peace. In God's reign, the state does not encourage or inflict evil upon some; rather, God makes room for all, enfolds all in divine protection and love. Now we see clearly why his project meets its seeming end upon the cross. The debauched despots and petty potentates of this world would never allow such a thing.
4. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the institution of the Feast of Christ the King, making it a fairly recent addition to our church calendar. In 1925, in the wake of the Great War's cataclysmic destruction, as rampant nationalism and fascism were again rising in Europe, Pope Pius XI declared this new feast. On this last Sunday of the church year, we proclaim not simply that Christ's Kingdom will outlast all earthly kingdoms and nation, but that God's reign is opposed to fascism and all forms of ultranationalism – even and especially those that try to coopt Christ for their purposes. This is not to say that the church seeks to be an alternative earthly power, although this has often been

a sad part of our history. Rather, the church proclaims that true power flows from God's reign of abundance, reconciliation, and love for all people. It is a power that is continually emptying itself, giving itself away for the sake of others. A reign that obeys no borders. A rule in which there is room enough for everyone to fit. A Kingdom in which God's grace does not place demands upon you, but gives itself to you, for you.

5. This, finally, is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which finds not its end but rather its fullness upon the cross of Calvary. Jesus, unlike the kings who scatter the flocks and seek good only for themselves, is the shepherd king who lays down his life for his sheep. Refuses earthly power. Forgives even those who are putting him to death. Pours himself out to become our daily bread, to reconcile us to God and one another, to protects us from evil, sin, and – finally – death. For his death will not be the end. The third day is coming, when the Son will burst over the horizon free from all that sought to bind him. Upon the cross, he welcomes us into God's eternal embrace. In the midst of our grace, his words are comfort and balm: Today you will be with me in paradise. While the intricacies of eternal life are above my paygrade, this much Jesus makes clear: Those who have died and gone on before us are exactly where they need to be: with Jesus, in the reign of God in which they have all they need, in which they are forgiven and free, in which no evil can touch them anymore.
6. The world will not be free of self-aggrandizing, overambitious autocrats any time soon. Their story, however, is not the one into which we were made to fit. You have been baptized into God's reign, beloved sheep of the Good Shepherd. He has made you fit for the Kingdom in which there is room for all. For us now is the task of enacting God's will in our midst. Working for all to have daily bread. Forgiving sins and creating reconciliation. Standing against evil of behalf of those whom evil targets. And doing all of this as loving proclamation of Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord, whose glory is in

giving power away. Jesus, who has died and yet lives that we might truly live, here on earth and forever in heaven. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.