

Christ the King Sunday
November 20, 2011

If you want something done right, do it yourself!

That's what God's all about in Ezekiel's prophecy today. God's had enough of his self-indulgent shepherds who feather their own nests while the sheep are left hungry, wounded, scattered and lost.

God thinks those very so-called leaders to blame for the exile to Babylon, from where Ezekiel's blasting this diatribe of God's "fed-up-ness". So now *God's* coming down to shepherd the sheep, to bind their wounds, to carry the lambs on her own bosom, to guide the sheep to lush pasture, to stand guard while they graze, rest and heal, and then to lead them home, by her own hand, through deserts suddenly strewn with flowers and running through with rivers of love.

That, in fact, is a pretty good vision of what God wants for all people.

Enough good water and food, the safety and peace to enjoy it, the binding of wounds, and healing rest, and, best of all, to be at home, in a place of your own, or a quiet heart, or both. That's what God wants for us.

Not tent cities, refugee camps and shelters. Not food insecurity and disease-laden water. Not inadequate health care, nor the rape of the earth for the financial gain of a few at the top.

The bible is absolutely uncompromising on this: God's will and dream is that we live together in a community of rich and poor, weak and strong, young and old sharing the earth's abundant resources with justice, in peace. The job of the shepherd is to see that this dream of God's is ever more real, and nothing makes God madder – (so say the prophets, at least) than when the shepherds – be they princes or kings, presidents or parliaments, congresses or councils, bishops, deans, or CEOs, high priests, lowly pastors, and anyone else who can fails to do so.

All through the bible, that's where God himself comes down - to Hagar in the wilderness, Hannah in the temple, Daniel in the lions' den, Elijah up on the mountainside, the hemorrhaging woman in the crowd, Bartimaeus at the gate, Paul chained up in prison and hundreds more – by God's own hand, or voice, or power, to take the side of those who've been forgotten, betrayed, and pushed aside by the very ones whose job it was to defend and care for them.

Could God possibly be any clearer?

"I am all about you, my people, with whom I dwell at the margins of life, and apart from your deepest engagement with the sorrow and need of the least of you, you will never meet me face to face.

Jesus goes even farther. God is God not only *for* the most needy, not simply near, beside, or among them. God, in Christ, *is one of them*, so that to neglect another's need is to turn our back on Jesus. And, while it may be true that doing so will land you forever in the place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, really, what more hell would anyone need than to miss the chance to see God, know God, and hold God in the wounded ones while piously searching for God in some other so-called sacredness?

He's with you, too, in all *your* woundedness, nakedness, hunger, captivity, and thirst though it might not show like it does in our Sunday night or Wednesday night guests. But if you will turn toward those things inside you - not hiding, denying, or numbing them, but tenderly caring for the poverty of your own soul, you'll meet Jesus there, too.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, and I wish it weren't. It's not a helpful name, because none of all our notions of kingliness befit this Jesus of the bible, this Jesus of the poor.

We may wish they did. We are fascinated with princely power because it makes us feel safe, and we swoon over hymns that crown our exalted Christ, lifted high on his heavenly throne. That manger's a little too vulnerable, and the cross, intolerable.

But again and again he tells us, "I'm not that king. I've brought my crown down among you and my crown is thorny. And I don't want jewels, gold, or obeisance. Bring bandages, instead, and soup, and warm coats. And don't bow down before me, but sit with me and hold me. And no royal processions, please, except as they take me, with you, out to the jails, sickbeds, and streets.

On Thursday I went to the grand opening of the new home of the Eastside Teen Outreach which most recently was housed at St. Gabe's. To show us what they battle every day, the teens did a mime set to music.

There was Jesus, dressed in John Stein's old robe, and a girl, embracing and dancing together, as he showed her all the world's delicious beauty and brought it to her to taste. But then came a guy who got between them, tempting her with drugs. Then one to tempt her with sex and a Goth girl to tempt her to cutting, and a skinny, beautiful girl to tempt her to bulimia, and, finally, someone to tempt her to suicide.

They all stood and swayed between her and Jesus, who, from behind them, kept trying to reach her, and call out to her. But they were winning, shouting and beating her further and further down, till finally Jesus couldn't take anymore and pushed through them to bend over her and to take their blows on his own shoulders.

The audience erupted with cheers, and tears, and applause, and I burned that image onto my heart - Jesus' outstretched arms bending towards and over her, and me, and anyone else who needs a defender, and all who cannot save themselves.

ETO makes that real for these kids because that's how it works. Jesus has only our hands to feed the hungry, and only our hearts to love the loveless, and only our words to speak up for the voiceless, and only our arms to lean over the defenseless.

And when we do, we will find him. Not just *near* them or *with* them or *for* them but *in* them, Jesus, himself, looking back at us through their eyes, blessing and warming us with their touch, showing us our own need because we have dared to look upon theirs. That's what all this servant love is all about after all. It's not philanthropy or social work or doing the right thing. It's relationship.

A relationship with the Shepherd King who will *only* be found at the center of every human pain, including our own.

On this Christ the King Sunday, I want to end with a quote I wish I'd written:

"As the Christian year ends, excuse me if I don't get too excited about the imperial Christ the King, but I'm only four Advent weeks from the crib and already I smell the straw and the dung. Precisely there, in that lowly and vulnerable place of need, Jesus, my Brother, calls me to be. "

Let's call it the "Feast of Christ and His Family", and honor him by making it so.

Amen.