

The King of Love

Part 4 of Sermon Series: *Gifts of Love*

a sermon based on

Revelation 1:4*b*-8

(with reference to John 18:33-37)

and delivered on

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Christ the King Sunday (Year B)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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According to Walmart, Kohls, Target, Macy's and Amazon, the Christmas season has started. It started early Friday morning with door buster sales on that high holy day that we know as Black Friday. Black Friday – so called not because of the bruises and black eyes sustained in the mad dash for \$100 televisions or the toy of the year – but because – now - the true purpose of Christmas is being revealed. Retailers will finally begin to show a profit.

On Thursday, families gathered to feast so that they would be well nourished for Friday morning. They took time away from watching football to peruse the various consumer opportunities that Black Friday – the first day of the Christmas season would bring – and to plan how to make the most advantage.

I've actually attended Thanksgiving dinners like that. I can't help but think it's becoming more common – if not acceptable – considering that one Black Friday commercial – even showed a family doing so – with humor but more in exaggeration than ridicule.

I find it somewhat ironic. Most of the days that the business community refers to as “Black” – Black Thursday, the beginning of the 1929 stock market crash which plunged the nation and the world into the Great Depression – or Black Monday the 1987 stock market crash – these are not days that we want to celebrate or really even remember.

For the church – for Christians – the day that maybe we should call Black Friday – we call Good Friday – the day that the King of Love, Jesus Christ, the Son of God died a degrading death at the hands of a Roman dictator and the consent of his own people. We call that day “good.” Why? {pause} Because we know it's not the end of the story. Because we know that Resurrection will follow. Because we know that that day opens up for all humanity a glory that was unimaginable beforehand.

In the Church we approach the seasons differently. In the Church, the Christmas Season doesn't end on December 25. It begins! When the world is relieved to be past Christmas (at least until the credit card bills arrive in January) – when the world is wallowing in its consumeristic stupor – the Church celebrates that God came to live among us – as one of us. Because that's such a big deal, we anticipate the arrival of Christmas – the Festival of the Nativity – through a season of Advent – of expectation. Most often, that season begins on the Sunday following the agitating diversion of Black Friday. Not this year.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. (A relatively new addition to the Christian calendar. The Roman church only added it in 1925). But there is something important to it. It is a reminder that what we will be anticipating through the upcoming season of Advent is the coming kingdom of God – with Jesus Christ as our king. But our king in a way the world had never imagined.

As Americans – this notion of a king is foreign – figuratively and literally. For the most part – even those monarchs that continue in other countries function as mere figureheads with no real power. If we were to look around for the type of kings the biblical world knew we'd look to powerful leaders like Robert Mugabe, Fidel Castro, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-Il – dictators.

There were also beneficent kings. We have some listed in the Bible – David, Josiah, Hezekiah. They tend to be outnumbered by the bad kings. The “good” kings for all their failures as human beings were good – and their people prospered – because they grasped that their rule was a responsibility rather than a privilege. The good kings for all their failures strived for righteousness.

In the Gospel lesson today. Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (Jn 18:33b) After some back and forth, “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’” (Jn 18:36) In effect, he's saying my followers play by different rules – by better rules – because the kingdom of God is different from and better than

all the kingdoms of man. The kingdoms of the world exist for their own sake. Kings act to sustain their own power and privilege sharing it with others only to secure their own position. But the Kingdom of God is more powerful.

Even though that conversation with Pilate on that Thursday night/Friday morning would lead to a black moment by Friday afternoon – it wasn't a defeat but a doorway to victory and the freedom that Christ offers all humanity.

Many Christians avoid reading Revelation because it's "scary". Or so they think because they've never read it. Some Christians limit their appreciation for Revelation thinking that it's only about the future. Listen again to those words that we heard earlier from Revelation 1:4-6

"Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Did you hear it. Grace and peace from him who IS and who WAS and who IS TO COME. Revelation isn't just about the future but about now. It anticipates the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, but offers us encouragement so that we can live for the kingdom in our own day.

I was trying to think of an example about how this happens. I'll admit, this is not a perfect example. Have many of you watched The Karate Kid? The movie? Either the 1984 version or the 2010 remake? In those movies you have a boy who moves with his family and is getting bullied. The common theme is that he ends up in a relationship with an insignificant/inconsequential man – a gardener or a maintenance man. That man would teach the boy karate, not from the perspective of attacking and dominating another, but for the purpose of having the confidence that he could defend himself without resorting to that trap of seeking dominance and prestige, and the inevitable cycle of challenge and conquest. To that end, the teacher has the boy practice some pretty "silly" tasks - in the original, painting a fence {move hand up and down} or waxing a car (wax on – wax off), in the remake, dropping his coat and picking it up. Things that don't really seem to be related to the goal of learning karate, but which do in fact prepare him.

God has done that for us. I used to look at the Bible and some of the rules and question whether they really matter today. Honestly, some of the rules were particular for the Jewish people. Others for all people. What I learned is that a few of them actually made sense. Maybe the practices that God has given us are actually the worldly motions that lead us into the kingdom, so that even though we might not fully experience it now, we can experience it now and anticipate its fulfillment.

What are these practices? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, tend to the stranger, welcome the alien, visit the prisoner. The Methodist General Rules sum them up as avoid evil, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God (the ordinances being – among others – participating communal worship, the sacraments, and generosity to the church).

All of these practices reflect the actions of a king like no other – the King of Kings – who came not to be glorified for his sake but to glorify us. So we too are called to build up others, even when it feels like we're just going through the motions or it doesn't make sense.

In worship for the next few weeks, we'll be singing (primarily) Advent songs – songs of expectation rather than Christmas songs, not because we don't want to celebrate Christmas but because we are preparing ourselves for its beginning rather than an end. We're preparing

ourselves for a vision of the Christ's return and his reign on earth. So we'll have extra opportunities to tend to those in need by dropping coins in a bucket or giving to charity. But it's also a time to reflect on who we are as a people – to look for and to righteous leaders – who build up, but to be the priest that we have been freed to be as it says in Revelation 1:6 – priests who serve the God and Father of the King of Love – the king who builds up others – as we attest to his glory by how we live for his kingdom even now. AMEN