

Thanksgiving Fit for a King

Whitefish UMC

November 20, 2011

John 18: 33-38; Matthew 6: 25, 33; Philippians 4:4-7

- ✦ Today is the last Sunday of the year. No, we haven't been fast-forwarded on some cosmic time machine. But we have come to the end of the Christian calendar on this third Sunday in November. Next week, with the arrival of the first Sunday in Advent, we begin a new season and a new year.
- ✦ We live in a different time and a different space, with a different calendar than the rest of the world, which is symbolic of living in a different soulscape, a different moral environment, and a more sacred universe, than the rest of the world.
- ✦ But many people of faith live within a different framework of time. Muslims celebrate Ramadan at different times according to the Muslim lunar calendar. It's a holy time of fasting from sun rise to sun set, followed by great feasting. Members of the Jewish faith live differently in time as well. Friday night at sundown, the observance of Sabbath begins and Saturday, our day of soccer and running errands, is kept holy. Buddhists are called to live so completely in the moment, they may not know when one year ends and the other begins!
- ✦ This Sunday is known as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday in our liturgical calendar. At the end of the year, we recognize the culmination of the year with a triumphant celebration. Christ the King Sunday is meant to remind us that no power can match the power of

God. We may not live in a government ruled by kings anymore, but we still need to be reminded who is in charge.

- ✦ Images of the Shepherd King in Psalm 100 and in today's gospel texts celebrate the sacred power of Christ in the world. And yet the gospel texts from John and Matthew are strange ones for a celebration such as this. They remind us of what is yet to come and has not yet arrived. We are living in an interim time, the power of God's reign has not come ---yet. But Christ guarantees us the time of God's reign WILL COME. In that time, death will be vanquished and the earthly powers will know the true power of God.
- ✦ And for that promise, we are thankful. We are called to rejoice, as Paul says in his letter to the church at Philippi. And this verse serves as a good reminder all year long to give thanks and rejoice and release worry to the cosmos, because the Lord is near.
- ✦ So here we are, in this combination celebration of Christ the King and of Thanksgiving Sunday. I'll try to weave them together. But first, do you know the history of the Thanksgiving holiday? I didn't, until doing research on another topic.
- ✦ In his essay, the Thanksgiving Story, Jerry Wilson reports that "George Washington proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving in 1789, although some were opposed to it. There was discord among the colonies, many feeling the hardships of a few Pilgrims did not warrant a national holiday. And later, President Thomas Jefferson scoffed at the idea of having a day of thanksgiving.
- ✦ It was Sarah Josepha Hale, a magazine editor, whose efforts eventually led to what we recognize as Thanksgiving. Hale wrote

many editorials championing her cause in her *Boston Ladies Magazine*, and later, in *Godey's Ladies Book*.

- ✦ Finally, after a 40 year campaign of writing editorials and letters to presidents and governors, Hale's obsession became a reality when, in 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving. It was proclaimed by every President after Lincoln, and it was sanctioned and set by Congress after Franklin Roosevelt tried to move it forward a week to add another week to the Christmas shopping season. The hue and cry that resulted forced Congress to make it legally and finally the fourth Thursday of November.
- ✦ A mildly interesting bit of history, until you begin to probe more deeply. Each year around this time, public radio has a series of Thanksgiving readings on air. I love it when the actor Sam Westerson reads Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. And it seems especially poignant this year mixed with the awful toll taken by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan on our soldiers and their families.
- ✦ It got me to thinking: wait a minute, it's also the 148th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of Thanksgiving. Remember, 1863 was a time of great sadness and turmoil in our country. The Civil War was in full horror and anguish.
- ✦ What a strange and incongruous time for a proclamation of Thanksgiving—with war raging and families as well as the nation torn asunder. Or was it?
- ✦ Listen to these words, this excerpt from Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation: *The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To*

these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful mighty providence of God.

- ✦ Lincoln goes on to list the blessings of the nation, including: that no foreign governments have attacked in the midst of the Civil War, that laws are being obeyed, harmony prevails everywhere except on the battlefield, western expansion, growth, and the bounty of natural resources are enjoyed—and that all this can be expected to continue with “large increase of freedom.”
- ✦ The great President goes on to remind the people: *that no human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart by the American people.*
- ✦ Lincoln then proclaimed Thanksgiving day—a day of Thanksgiving and Praise “*to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens*”.
- ✦ And here is where the Proclamation takes a turn that we in our society have forgotten. It’s important to remember that President Lincoln understood the ravages of the Civil War to be God’s judgment on the nation for its sinfulness. Just six months earlier, he had proclaimed a national day of fasting and confession and prayer. He called the nation to repent for its lack of reliance on and obedience to God. Lincoln first recalled the many blessings of the nation. And then, with

words that echoed the King of Nineveh in the book of Jonah, this exhortation:

✦ *But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.*

✦ Presumably, the nation did join in prayer. But the war continued. Shortly after the Thanksgiving proclamation in October, 1863, Lincoln delivered the famous Gettysburg Address, at which he eloquently reminded the nation of the hallowing of that ground by the sacrifice of the soldiers who died there.

✦ Still, President Lincoln urged the nation to give thanks and praise to God on Thanksgiving Day. But he didn't stop there. This is what he said:

✦ *And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds*

of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and Union.

- ✦ The President knew his Scripture. “But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.” For God’s kingdom is one in which all people receive compassion, mercy, and care.
- ✦ And here we are, 148 years later. The Civil War is over, at least for most of us, but other wars have come and gone. New ones have taken their place. Our soldiers and innocent civilians die brutally, leaving widows and orphans, mourners and sufferers to cope somehow.
- ✦ Our nation is much more pluralistic now—our President, while a Christian, is called to tread carefully so as not to trample the beliefs of those Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Sikhs, and adherents to all kinds of new sects that make up our religious landscape.
- ✦ We are tempted to ask, like Pilate in John’s Gospel lesson for today, “What is truth?” Who is this King that we honor and celebrate and worship today?
- ✦ Last week, Tom and I watched the film “Water for Elephants,” based on the novel by Sara Gruen. In both, the ringmaster of the famous Bellini Brothers Circus runs his “kingdom” as a sovereign nation. “Everything is an illusion,” he says, with a sardonic sneer.
- ✦ Then if it’s all an illusion, what is real, what is true? I won’t spoil the book or the film by telling you, but the question goes beyond any novel or movie.

- ✦ In our pluralistic world, we are faced with many religious truths. Our world finds itself in a time of both conflict and blessing. Just as Jesus did. Just as Lincoln did. We face the ultimate issues of life and death and love and hope, with many religions claiming to have their own truth.
- ✦ Even as we respect those who embrace other truths, we who follow Jesus give thanks to God for the ultimate gift of love—for the gift of God's self, God's son, Jesus the Christ. Our response is praise and thanksgiving—gratitude and love for God's mercy and compassion for a sinful and still yet beautiful world.
- ✦ What is Truth? Pilate asks and so do we. For us, Truth with a capital T is a Life. A person who in himself contains Truth that moves us beyond propositions, words, and facts and toward a King—a very different one than we might expect. Before this Truth we can only stand in silence, just as there was silence when Pilate asked that haunting question. Jesus didn't need to answer, he simply lived Truth.
- ✦ We stand in silence and in trembling. He knows the truth about us, our aspirations, our secrets, and our attitudes. And yet he offers us mercy and blessing.
- ✦ Jesus doesn't give an answer in words to Pilate—he doesn't talk about theology; he simply stands there as the embodiment of Truth. An answer does come, but still not with words, but in an act of Ultimate Love. Love and Truth will meet in a Roman execution. There, God stretches out God's Truth before the world. Those who come to that Truth will find it. And in that Truth they will find life and love.
- ✦ So, may we live our lives as if Christ the King holds reign every day. May we show our gratitude with praise and thanksgiving every day.

But not just in worship and prayer—in living, in seeking first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. In showing compassion for others, in offering love and freedom because Christ is our Truth, our King—one not like the kings of this world, but the Servant King who rules our lives and hearts and minds.

- ✦ Amid the sure knowledge that the blessings of our lives come ultimately not from our own brilliance and hard work, may we give thanks to the King who asks that we offer care and mercy and love for all those of our world who suffer, who hunger, who hurt. Just as King Jesus does for us.
- ✦ “Always be full of joy in the Lord: I say it again, rejoice! Remember that the Lord is coming soon.”
- ✦ Give thanks for Christ our King, from whom all blessings and mercies flow. For us and for a world in need of healing and hope. Amen.