

Who Needs a King?

November 25, 2007

Year C

Proper 29 (34)

Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

When I attended the UCC Missouri Mid-South conference biennial meeting, I knew that the high point of the meeting for me would be the worship service with communion on Sunday morning. I was especially excited when I learned from the program that there was an opportunity to join a volunteer choir for the service. Moreover, I was not disappointed. It was a beautiful and moving service. A nationally known UCC pastor who had spoken to great acclaim at the general synod of the UCC delivered the sermon. The gospel reading was from John chapter 13: "When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

After she had read this scripture the pastor shared an aside with us, in which she stated that she that she was personally not comfortable with calling Jesus "lord" or with calling the disciples "servants." I was thinking about that pastor and wondering how she would observe this Sunday, traditionally called Christ the King Sunday.

It is very American to be uncomfortable with Kings and with royalty and aristocrats in general. After all, our declaration of independence asserts our right to throw off the rule of a king, specifically the King of Great Britain, who is accused of trying to establish an absolute Tyranny over our 13 States. It is certainly one of the essential features of our nation that the people and its elected representatives hold political power, instead of a king and nobles who receive power by birth. Most of us would agree with Mark Twain, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, “All kings is mostly rascallions.” However, that does not stop us from rolling out the red carpet when the queen of England or another of the royals comes to visit.

My Johnson ancestors came to Chicago from Sweden in the late 19th century. For them to come so far to such a strange land, they must have had an image of the American freedom that awaited them. My great-grandfather, a cabinetmaker, exercised that freedom by joining a union and taking part in the great Pullman strike of 1894. Each of our ancestors, in their own way, came to America to be free of the kings and dictators of the old world. I believe that they mainly came here to work. They came to take advantage of the opportunities to work, to own land, and to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Of course, some Americans came here as slaves and the fruits of their labors belonged to others. Nevertheless, slavery could not last, because it was fundamentally alien to the American spirit.

Although many of our ancestors lived in cities and worked in shops and factories, the American imagination was fired by the image of the pioneer, braving the elements and hostile Indians to secure their own farm or ranch on the frontier, carving their own destiny out of the wilderness and free from the dictates of church and state. Of course, to

enjoy fully that freedom, an American had to be free, male, white, and over 21, but this image was compelling for Americans of all varieties. It is still compelling to the vast majority of Americans who live in suburbs, and work in stores, offices, factories, and hospitals and who never see the wide open spaces except on vacation or on TV.

Our American freedom has two faces—“freedom to” and “freedom from.” Americans had the freedom to pursue their dreams and hoped to move from “rags to riches” due to hard work, thrift, imagination, and luck. They also had “freedom from” the intrusive hierarchies and suffocating social obligations on the Old World. Americans did not have to bow before the princes of state or church. Americans had the freedom to be left alone, if they so chose.

I am afraid that most of us have lost any clear sense of what our “freedom to” is for. Most of us work for vast public or private organizations that are more soulless and regimented than any kingdom ruled by an absolute monarch. A few of us are creative and brave enough to take advantage of the blindness and inflexibility of the giants, but our spirited and nimble enterprises are, year after year, being worn down by regulation, taxation, and red tape.

Americans still have “freedom from.” We can refuse to join any clubs, groups, or organizations. We can choose not to attend church. We can have no friends, ignore our neighbors, and avoid our family. We can shuttle ourselves between home, work, shopping, and home without making any human contact. At work, we may be forced to actually communicate with other human beings. If that gets bad enough, we can take an early retirement or go out on disability, so we can spend all our time at home in front of the TV or on the Internet. Our society does not really care whether we do any productive

work. What is important to society is that we are a good consumer. Many have noticed that the new test of American patriotism is the willingness to go out and spend money that we don't have on things that we don't need. Our "freedom to" has degenerated into choosing between brand y and brand x.

Someone who defines himself or herself as a consumer has no spiritual freedom. To paraphrase Ephesians 6, they have no armor against the devil's schemes. They have already lost the struggle against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Jesus and his disciples also talked about "freedom from" and "freedom to." Through Christ and the new covenant of his death and resurrection, Christians had gained freedom from the Old Testament Law: Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Even more, Christians had gained freedom from sin and from fear of God's judgment: Ephesians 3:12, "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." This freedom from sin will be extended to all of creation when Christ comes again: Romans 8:20 "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

What about the Christian "freedom to?" It is the freedom to choose to serve Christ and our brothers and sisters in Christ: Galatians 5:13, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your

neighbor as yourself.”” Like Paul and the other Apostles, are free to choose to be servants and witnesses of the Gospel. If we choose to be Christ’s servants, he will give us sufficient grace for the task: as Paul said in Ephesians 3:7, “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.”

We have the freedom to choose to a servant of a king, something that seems foreign to our American upbringing. However, the only similarity of Christ to other kings is that he has authority and power. Christ was a king who chose a cross of death for his throne, and who from that cross, brought forgiveness and hope to a justly convicted criminal. Christ chose to set aside that power and became our servant, our slave. As Paul said in Philippians 2:6, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

There is no shame in being a servant to such a Lord and King. For as Christ said in the Gospel of John 15:14, “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.” Amen.

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