



SUNDAY SERMON

## The Messy Middle

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DATE

Last Sunday after  
Pentecost  
Sunday, Nov. 25, 2018

PREACHER

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I fell in love with the idea of subversion in college. I think I actually loved it before college, I just didn't have the words to describe it. It wasn't until I was a first-year student at a small Quaker liberal arts college that I learned the vocabulary to describe the important work of upending expectations and questioning power. As a community we talked about subverting dominant paradigms. We talked about how racist and patriarchal language reinforces systemic forms of oppression. I began reading Julian of Norwich, the medieval English mystic whose dual description of God as Father and Mother subverted traditional claims on God and shaped my understanding of Christianity. As a woman married to another woman, I take delight in upending strangers' expectations of who I am on a regular basis. What does your husband do? I smile kindly- really, sincerely kindly- and say, well, my wife... For me, subversion is part of my vocabulary.

This is why I love that Saint Columba's takes seriously inclusive language to talk about God and Christ. We, like Dame Julian, subvert the dominant paradigm, upend the usual narrative. When we don't use he or him as a pronoun for God, when we use ruler and sovereign in place of Lord, when we use reign or rule instead of kingdom, we proclaim the belief that God is bigger than gender, grammatical or literal. We urge people, ourselves included, to think about our own expectations of what God means. God is bigger, grander, wilder, stranger, better than we can comprehend, and the more we remove the boxes we've placed around God, the better equipped we are to glimpse the Holy One, the creator of earth and stars and plants and animals and space and time and us. The more expansive our language, the better our capacity to perceive God who transcends all human divisions.

And yet... And yet I really, really like calling Jesus king and lord. Normally you wouldn't know this about me, but today is Christ the King Sunday. Today is the final Sunday of the church year, and since the 1920's it has been used to celebrate the kingship of Jesus. Here we arrive at a conflict of goods, as my ethics professor might call it: inclusive language, or Christ the king? Inclusive language- ruler, sovereign, reign-subverts the historically dominant patriarchal language around God. But lord and king, at least as the earliest followers of Jesus used them, subvert and upend all the ideas about what kingship and lordship mean.

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You see, in Jesus' time, Lord was a loaded word. Lord was the title used for the Roman emperor, and it conflated earthly power and divine might. For the citizens of Rome, and for the people swept into the empire through land grabs and wars, the emperor was Lord. Caesar receives our allegiance. In him we put our trust. We believe he will provide for us. Caesar is Lord was used as a public greeting. After death the emperor was worshipped as a god, and in the eastern part of the empire, including Palestine, emperors were revered as divine during their lifetime, not having to wait until death to be deified. These cults of empire worship conjured a powerful mix of political and religious allegiance. Caesar was all-powerful, Caesar brought order to lands which had experienced long-standing skirmishes and intertribal warfare. He did things that it seemed only deities could do- sweeping away opposition, bringing stability, bringing justice. Caesar is Lord.

This is the nexus of the charge against Jesus in today's gospel. We know from the stories that those in power disliked Jesus' free-and-easy understanding of the Sabbath, his habit of inviting himself over to dine with taxpayers, of standing up for those accused of adultery, of healing those outside the Hebrew people, of speaking out against hypocrisy among the temple elite. These are all subversive acts, but Rome doesn't really care. It is this specific charge- declaring kingship- that is an offense for the empire. Only Caesar can be lord. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks. Are you the King?

It is against this backdrop that Jesus is Lord must be understood. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord is simultaneously about sovereignty and divinity. Jesus is king, Jesus is messiah, Jesus is divine. Those early followers were upending popular assumptions about what a ruler was by putting their allegiance in Jesus, this messiah from God, this man who had been killed by the empire, this king whose kingdom is not of this world. They proclaimed themselves citizens of God. Jesus is Lord was one of the earliest creeds, and it is inherently, undeniably subversive. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. If Jesus is Lord, then there's more to life than power and politics. If Jesus is Lord, then his law -to love God and to love neighbor- is the most fundamental of laws. If Jesus is Lord, our citizenship is ensured not by our birth but by our belief, and we follow not an earthly ruler but the one God, who made all of us in love and came down to meet us where we are in Jesus.

The early followers of Christ, all they had was the promise that God had upended the expectations of this world by sending Jesus to show what power and sovereignty were really about. Power was about feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, visiting the imprisoned, healing the sick. Kingship wasn't about ruling with an iron fist and bringing the kind of peace which is only an absence of war, but instead about God's shalom, God's life-giving, harmonious, freely given peace. We, I anyway, all too often fail to hear the subversive message at the heart of Jesus is Lord. We let a whole lot of things be Lord before Jesus, including but not limited to: money, celebrity, success, health, power. Jesus is Lord calls me back to the truth of the gospel. It's why I have learned to love Christ the King Sunday.

And yet, for many among us, Lord and king are problematic words. Do we have to say Jesus is Lord in order to talk about the subversive power of God's love in the incarnate Christ? Do we have to use patriarchal language to talk about a God who, I fervently believe, seeks to break down every barrier? No, we don't. But I think we should, at least sometimes. Because that language is the language of our tradition. Lord doesn't sound subversive today, but it was a radical response for those early seekers. In a world dominated by empire, Jesus is Lord was shocking. It promised the coming of God's own kingdom, God's own reign. We can value inclusivity and tradition at the same time, expansive language and Jesus is Lord. We can respect and hear the people for whom one or the other is problematic. And what's more, we can see the tension between the two as a lesson in how to live if Jesus is truly sovereign, if we see ourselves first and foremost as citizens of God's shalom and not of any kingdom of this earth.

We live in a world of either/or, of dichotomies and divisions, where people who want to find common ground are seen by the people at the extremes as wishy-washy. But we are The Episcopal Church and we value the *via media*, the middle way. Many of the questions we ask are best answered not by either/or but by both/and. We can answer the pull to extremes by seeking out compromise, holy compromise. When people at either end yell, threaten, and persuade, we can listen to both, and also to the voice of God, the voice that centers us and directs us towards the kingdom. Sometimes we take sides, because it's the right thing to do. Often, however, the subversive work of the kingdom is to not choose a side at all but instead to live in the messy middle, the both/and, the space of no easy answers. It's about discernment and the serious work of listening to the world around us, the traditions we carry, and the still, small voice that guides us. This is what it means to proclaim that Jesus is lord. It means that we are ever orienting ourselves not towards the extremes, no matter how loudly they cry out, but towards God. Because if Jesus is Lord, our allegiance is ultimately in the God who calls us to act out our faith in love to all our neighbors, whether we agree with them or not. Jesus is Lord.