

Conquering Our Own Kingdom
Luke 22:24-30
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God is clear. Scripture is clear. The church is clear. The rest of the world not so much, but in the Christian community, we believe that Jesus Christ is King over all creation. Not just the kingdoms of this world, the ones that might appear on maps and globes, but over everything, even what we can't see. Our passage from Colossians suggests that Christ is ruler of our entire universe, or multiple universes, if there are others, everything as far as only God's eye can see. It's a very nice theological statement and it is a divine theory. What remains an open question is how exactly does that work in practice when we still see so much evidence of people thinking they run their own kingdoms, of borders and governments and elections and conflict among nations? How can we make sense of the reign of Christ with the political reality before us? How does Jesus bring all nations and rulers under his rule?

The simplest solution is to say that Christ is the ruler of our hearts, that the kingdom over which he is sovereign isn't really anything terrestrial or even spacial, but rather spiritual, that his realm is defined not by artificially imposed geographical boundaries but God-given moral and ethical ones, by the divine attributes of righteousness and love and grace. In such an understanding of Christ's kingdom, what matters is not adherence to the laws and culture of whatever

political state in which you are a citizen or subject, but only the commandment to love God and neighbor that comes from the truly legitimate ruler of your life. This is the voluntary reign of Christ in the world, or at least voluntary participation. No one is enforcing God's rules. You can abide by them if you want to. Christ remains ruler of all of our hearts, but you don't get thrown in the divine jail if you refuse to pledge allegiance or pay your tithe or even to live peaceably among your neighbors. You see, what matters is your relationship with Christ your king. The voluntary reign of Christ in the world is prone, however, to a certain kind of anarchy, because even though Christ is king over the hearts of those who choose to follow him, there are both plenty of others who don't choose to follow him, and even among those who do, there are always differing opinions of how the kingdom should work on a day to day basis. If this weren't true, we Christians we would be united in our understanding of how the world should work, and there would never be any disagreements between us. But that's never been true, has it?

An early solution to this dilemma is found in Scripture in those places where we are commanded to obey our earthly rulers because they are divinely appointed. God has chosen the emperors and governors and kings of this world to keep order which is more divinely useful than the chaos of anarchy. In this scheme, we Christians are ultimately subjects of Christ's rule, but for our time on earth we must fit in somewhere, and God has placed us under the care of the temporal rulers God has chosen according to the divine criteria. This solution may be satisfying if

order is our primary concern, but it falls somewhat short in the face of injustice and the outright flaunting of God's authority. Genocide just doesn't speak too highly of God's choice of rulers in Christ's absence from an earthly throne.

Well, what if we only picked Christian kings to rule over us? That would be great, right? They would rule us as Christ would if he were here. And what if all of our laws came straight out of the Bible? Surely God would be happy with that, and so would everybody else. Well, theocracy hasn't had a very good track record either, I'm afraid. Turns out that none of us are perfect, and that cultures change, and that not everyone living within the political boundaries of what we might call a Christian nation is always happy with the way Christians choose to live their lives and lead their countries. And so between falling short, and meeting opposition from within, the so-called Christian nation remains a mythical country seen about as often as the fictional land of Brigadoon which appears for only one day every two hundred years.

Well, where does that leave us on this Christ the King Sunday? Is the reign of Christ never to be truly seen or fulfilled? Can we not come closer to living in the midst of the kind of justice and peace Jesus embodied in his time on earth? And my answer to those really important questions is --- I really don't know! There is no satisfying answer for why Christ does not simply come on down from heaven and make things the way they are supposed to be. It couldn't possibly be any worse that it already is. But for reasons that remain hidden from us, we are stuck with our

vain attempts and our best guesses, and those mystifying words we heard tonight from the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus tells his disciples, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer upon you, just as my father has conferred upon me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on the thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Well, *that* clears things up. I guess we’ve just overlooked this passage all these years where it says that everything should have been divided by twelve, each part ruled by one of the original twelve disciples. After all, this is part of Jesus’ farewell speech in Luke. And the word “confer,” as in I “confer upon you,” sounds a lot like the language of a last will and testament, of bequeathing, of the handing off of possessions, and certainly the world is Jesus’ possession. If only it were that simple.

What makes it more complicated to grasp is trying to understand just what belongs to Jesus. What is he giving away on his deathbed? Is it the very universe which he has created? There are a lot of people who would like to have that! Or is it something even more valuable? Indeed it is. Jesus is bequeathing to the disciples, and to us nothing more or nothing less than himself, than his intimate knowledge and understanding and connection with God that is expressed through his life and ministry and finally his death. You see, Jesus is both the king and the kingdom itself. As the ruler of the universe, he is free to give away both that which he created and that which he is. “I am,” he says, “and I give myself away to you.”

If that seems a little mysterious, and even more difficult to administer than any of the other ways we've tried through the centuries, it is, but it is also the only way to really wrap our hearts and minds around Jesus Christ as our King and about how we are to live as subjects of that king. What is lovely about how Jesus reveals this great truth is its context, its setting, as he is sitting down with his disciples for their last meal together, and as they are arguing about which of them would be the greatest, would be the leader, would be the king after he is gone. Immediately before our reading tonight comes the last supper, at which he takes the cup and says, "Take this and divide it among yourselves. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. This bread is my body, which is given for you." Powerful, powerful words. And yet, their minds immediately go to who will succeed him, as if they really knew what that meant. They thought they did! They are talking about consolidation. He is talking about sharing. They are talking about power. He is talking about covenant. They are talking about leadership. He is talking about servanthood. And so begins this great teaching about the kings of the gentiles, and that the greatest must be like the youngest, that the servant is greater than then the one dining at the table. And finally that he covenants his kingdom to them. Yes, it is the same word in Greek for the new "covenant" of the cup and the "conferring" to the disciples of the kingdom. The message is clear. Jesus gives himself and he is the kingdom, he is the covenant, the promise, the bond between

God and us. That's what we receive. And in that kingdom, that promise, we will eat and drink, and, yes, judge the twelve tribes of Israel.

Ah, there's the hard part. The judging of the twelve tribes of Israel, the practical, daily, gut-wrenching part that involves living together and making hard decisions and caring for one another. It is not all fun and games in the reign of Christ. It is hard work. And so it must be organized. There must be leadership and authority or all will be anarchy. But that leadership and authority must be just and righteous. And how can we have that justice and righteousness if we don't have that theocracy which never really works, and so we are wrapped up once again in this conundrum of Christ the King. Trust me. We'll never get this right and we'll never get it figured out. But we have to try and we have to remember that Christ's kingdom is his relationship with God, and his relationship with the world, not his ownership of them. And in that relationship, his posture was not one of power but of service. Power doesn't give itself away. It must be taken. But the nature of service is to share, to give oneself away, and in so doing to find oneself, and to lead others to the table to eat and drink in that kingdom. Jesus had followers sitting with him at that last supper not because he commanded them to be there as their king, but because he had been giving himself away, and in that gift they could see the nature of his kingdom, and they wanted to be there, celebrating once again in the Passover meal the freedom God gives us to be in relationship with the ruler of this universe and with one another.

The Passover meal was a meal celebrated with unleavened bread, bread made without the yeast that would make it rise. It was a flat bread, quicker to make and easier to carry, made in the rush to leave Egypt when God's time was right. It was the bread born of the necessity brought on by Pharaoh's exercise of power, by his idea of kingdom, an idea not so far from our own. I think what Jesus is suggesting when he bequeaths the kingdom to the disciples is that the time for unleavened bread has passed away. As Christ's living kingdom in the world, we are to be leaven that gives rise to a new bread for a new feast. As we serve, as we give ourselves away, as we pour ourselves out, as we bequeath the kingdom to each subsequent generation, we tame the anarchy of our individualistic hearts, we make unacceptable the tyranny of rulers not fit to govern, we give up the idea that we can impose by force what we can only bring by invitation. God's kingdom is always a work in progress, and we must always be about the business not of conquering the world to achieve it, but of conquering ourselves and our notions of that kingdom as something other than the relationship of grace God has with the world and with us. May God give us the strength to serve as Christ served us. Amen.