

“King of Kings”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 132:11-18 New Testament Lesson – 1 Timothy 6:6-16

The father of a wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country, supposedly to visit a relative. In actuality, the trip was to show his son how poor, country folks live. They stayed the weekend in the home of a relative who was a very humble farmer. At the end of the trip, as they were traveling back home, the father asked his son, “What did you think of the trip?” The son replied, “Very nice, Dad.” “Did you notice how they lived?” the father asked. “Yes,” said the son. “What did you learn?,” asked the father. “I learned that we have one dog in our house, and they have four. Also, we have a fountain in our garden filled with goldfish, but they have a trout stream that has no end. And where we have imported lamps in our garden, they have the stars! And while our garden goes to the edge of our neighbor’s fence, they have the entire horizon as their back yard!” While the father was speechless. The son then said, “Thank you, Dad, for showing me how poor we really are.”¹

Our New Testament lesson opens by saying, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” and it ends by talking about the sovereignty of Christ as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” It is Christ who has the greatest power over all the earth, not the might dollar.

Yet in our society, Christ seems to take a back seat to those with deep pockets. And this is true when it comes to, not only business and politics, but also our own health, how we spend our days, where we live, even the ability to attract friends or marry that man or woman of one’s dreams. We tend to think money can meet all our needs or overcome all our troubles. We had a good example of what carries the most weight in our society in the presidential campaign. No matter who you supported, your candidate spent a lot of money for the chance to be ruler of the free world.

In this society, money is King. But in the Bible, there’s a different King: Jesus Christ. It is Christ who deserves our trust, Christ alone whom we can turn to, come what may.

¹ “The lesson,” reprinted in Vanguard, vanguardmae.com.

The Bible teaches us to shun or turn away from or, really, to flee our fixation on money and earthly powers, and instead to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” But is that what we in this society get up in the morning focused on—returning gentleness and love when the world dishes out power-plays and meanness.

Do we respond with endurance and faith when our health fails us, or do we fall into fear and denial? Do we pursue righteousness and godliness as our highest calling, or do we want *more than anything* to be a success – to have the best job, be the best student or the coolest in school or sports, earn the most money, have the smartest SmartPhone, call our own shots in life, boss around the little brother or sister?

If we’re honest with ourselves – if I’m honest with myself – that’s who we really are as people – competitive, driven and self-centered. In a segment last Sunday on the TV news program 60 Minutes, researchers showed that we as human beings are predisposed to break the world up into different groups. And in doing so, we are predisposed in infancy to create “us” versus “them.”²

But as children get older, researchers found that around age 8, they start choosing equality and fairness over domination and meanness. And then, by age 9 and 10, children in the research study began doing something that 60 Minutes’ Leslie Stahl called “really crazy – deliberately giving the other kid more.” “They become generous,” said Stahl, adding, “chalk one up for society.”

Researchers attribute this selfless, altruistic giving to kids becoming educated and acculturated – “their heads stuffed full of virtues that we might want to have their heads stuffed with,” to quote one researcher. And yet, even though we learn to overcome our instinct to assert power and control over others, it’s still there. “As adults,” says the research, “we can only see these (self-centered, instinctual tendencies of children) and nod – it’s still in us. When we’re under pressure and life is difficult, we regress to our younger selves and all this elaborate stuff that we have on top disappears,” leaving us self-centered and adversarial. It’s “us” versus “them” all over again, and in the end nobody really seems to come out a winner. Stahl concludes the segment with this observation: “It seems we’re left where we all began, with a mix of altruism, selfishness; justice, bigotry; kindness.”

So how do we protect ourselves and our children from selfishness and injustice? How do we help them – and us – to value fairness and kindness? When under real pressure in life, how do we keep from

² <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50135408n>

becoming self-centered and judgmental and adversarial? How do rise to our higher calling?

The answer to this is found in our New Testament lesson for today. First Timothy identifies Jesus Christ as “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light.” That is to say, our Lord Jesus Christ is supreme over all things, and that includes anything that’s putting us under pressure or causing us to revert to our baser instincts. In all things and at all moments, we can trust in God.

But do we? No; not in all things. Sometimes not even in the littlest things. Sometimes we act as if when things go wrong it’s the end of the world. And of course, it’s not. In fact, when we cultivate our trust in Jesus Christ and maintain our faith in God Almighty, we actually rise above all things, in this world and the next.

An online subscription called the “Omega Letter” advertises itself as being “a book on Bible prophecy that automatically updates itself every single month!” People who subscribe are promised “front row seats to those very events that will culminate in the soon return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” – which is to say, the “End Times.” Looking at this website, the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus noted, with some comic relief, that its prediction of “the End Times” comes at “a special reduced rate for three-year subscriptions.” You need not be too concerned, says Neuhaus, until the publisher “will only take your money one month at a time.”³

We need not worry about the End Times, nor the end-game of anything we’re facing. As Christians, we need not worry about any troubles of this day, nor any troubles that might meet us tomorrow.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. really drives this home in a hymn he wrote in 1953 called “God is Able.”⁴ It starts out asking, “Is someone here moving toward the twilight of life, and fearful of that which we call death?” And it answers, ‘Why be afraid?’

Is someone here on the brink of despair because of the death of a loved one, or the waywardness of a child? Why despair? God is able to give us the power to endure that which cannot be changed. Is someone here anxious because of bad health? Why be anxious? Come what may, God is able. Surely God is able.” Powerful words.

³ <http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/default.asp>

⁴ The United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 106.

The Rev. King goes on in published sermon to assure us that “only God is able. At times we may feel that we do not need God,” says King, “but on the day when the storms of disappointment rage, the winds of disaster blow, and the tidal waves of grief beat against our lives, if we do not have a deep and patient faith, our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God,” says King, referring to gods with a small “g” as opposed to our God, who is the big “G.” “Only God is able,” says King. “It is faith in God that we must rediscover. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy, and bring new light into the dark caverns of pessimism.”⁵

What the Rev. King preaches is what the First Timothy teaches. It says, Christ “alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light. ... To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” That’s it.

That is where true power and position reside in this world of ours. Not with us, but with God. If we remain focused on that – in good times and in bad – if we teach that to our children and our children’s children, then we need not be worried about any struggle we may face, any hardship we may suffer, nor any loss we may sustain.

It’s not our struggles, or hardships or losses that define who we are and whether we’re successful and if we’re happy in life. What defines us as Christians is Jesus Christ, fully God, fully human, and thus, fully able to overcome all things.

And that, my friends, is money in the bank. We can go forth from this place today with a pocket full of faith, able to cover any and all of our accounts. Because, ours is a deep-pocket faith; a faith more powerful than anything we may face on earth. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most gracious God, we come to this place of prayer ever grateful that you offer us a safe refuge ... if we would but remember.

Remind us that it is our choice always to be restored ... renewed ... and recreated through the power of Christ, who is love made manifest.

Grant us the wisdom and the courage to release the things that separate us from you ... like our willingness to let second-best be good enough or our readiness to be less than honest in our schoolwork and our business ... or our tendency to treat others in a manner that is less than fair.

⁵ “God Is Able,” a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by Charles Henderson, <http://www.godweb.org/godisable.htm>.

Fill us instead with integrity and honesty in our dealings with others – and with ourselves. Grant us the grace to treat each person we meet as we would want to be treated.

We know that to bear the cross is to bear witness to a commitment to a way of life. Grant us the grace to carry the cross proudly as a people restored ... renewed ... and recreated.

And for those of us for whom restoration and wholeness seem impossible, we pray your completeness upon them.

Let those who are battling illness, poverty, loss, or any earthly or spiritual struggle find their way eased by your presence in their life. And where we can be an instrument of that presence and provision, send us out, Lord, in service and love.

We pray all this in the name of the one we follow to Jerusalem, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.