

“King of Kings”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
January 8, 2017**

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

New Testament lesson: Matthew 2:1-3

“It’s good to be the king.” Before I became a pastor – I wasn’t a king – I worked in public relations, where I first heard that phrase. I worked for a company called PeopleServe, which provides services for people with developmental disabilities – you know, group homes, supported employment, day-programs. The founder and owner of the company was a man named Vince Pettinelli. Vince built PeopleServe from a single group home in Columbus, Ohio, to a \$300 million company in 12 states and the District of Columbia, serving more than 4,000 people.

One of Vince’s favorite sayings was “It’s good to be the king.” Of course, that saying can have different meanings depending on who’s saying it. Vince was a social worker at heart. That’s how he got his start and that’s how he ran his business – in service to others, and particularly to those less fortunate.

The Psalm we are focusing on today is a prayer of blessing for the king of ancient Israel at that time, and today, for all those in leadership positions, which is all of us in one way or another. We pray that God would grant those who lead and guide and decide for others a special sense of justice and righteousness – justice and righteousness that is focused on the needs of others, not the wealth and success of the king or the leader. Any leader – whether of nations or corporations or schools or families – any leader worth having is one who places the well being of others ahead of his or her own power, wealth and aspirations.

We each have the opportunity in life to take the leadership role – to be the king. Older siblings are in a position to lead and influence their younger brothers and sisters; parents, aunts and uncles look after children; husbands and wives share lordship of the household, bosses look after their employees and make decisions on their behalf. We each can and should embrace the leadership role God has given us.

AND, we should do it looking to God as Lord and King. Today is Epiphany Sunday or Three Kings’ Day, when we celebrate the revelation that Jesus is the Son of God, Lord of all people, and that means, kings and princes, bosses and parents, presidents and citizens. Psalm 72 shows us that all leaders should look to God as Lord and King. And it shows us why they should do that – what benefits or results there are from being faithful to the Kingdom of God, the Lordship of Christ.

The Psalm points to three groups of people we should always keep in mind concerning leadership and service. There are those in need, those who control the resources needed, and there's society in general, which is made up of both groups together, as one.

For instance, in most families, the parents have or control food, money, clothing and most everything else the family needs. The children are the ones who need these things but can't get them by themselves. And then there's the family overall, which is the parents and children together as one. Whether you are a parent, aunt, uncle, or older sibling, you have a responsibility to look after the needs of younger people in the family, and sometimes, it's the youngest in the family who leads the way, has the best idea.

Psalm 72 is a prayer that asks God to help us to be good leaders, to the betterment of all concerned. "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son," says the Psalm. As a leader in the family or at work or at school or in the community, we are to seek God's justice and righteousness, which is always directed outward, always looking after those in need.

As the Psalmist prays, "May he (the king, the leader) judge (or treat) your people (God's people) with righteousness and your poor with justice." This is something we have to pray for, because it's hard! It's hard to put the needs of others ahead of our own desires and aspirations.

The world tells us to focus on getting more money, to use our resources to make ourselves happy, to take the easiest way out, have the most fun we can, even at the expense of others. So we have to pray for the strength to not be so focused on ourselves that we overlook the needs of others. We have to pray for God's guidelines in knowing what's just and right – what's fair for all concerned, what will bring prosperity to all people, what is that will "give deliverance to the needy" and put an end to that which keeps people down, the oppressor, as the Psalm puts it.

That is the first part of Psalm 72 – treating those in need as God would treat them, with care and compassion, grace and mercy, selflessness and sacrifices. We have to pray for the strength and wisdom to do that.

Next, the Psalm shifts its perspective and looks at the leader himself or herself, at how God looks upon such a selfless, faithful leader. It says, "May he/she live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days, may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more." In other words, may he or she have longevity and abundance and growth, all lifelong.

The point is that when leaders treat those in need – those they lead, those they serve – as God would treat them, God is pleased to grant blessing upon blessing to such leaders. Notice that God’s blessings are not measured in wealth or power but rather in the beautiful and poetic imagery of life, life as grand as the sun and as long as the moon, growth as satisfying as rain that falls on mown grass and showers that water the earth.

How many leaders do you know who look to the grandeur of the sun and moon as a measure of their success, the growth of those around them in such abundance that it rains down as a blessing to all the earth? Not many. We have to pray for that! Because that’s just the type of leaders we are supposed to be in our families, at school and at work, in our communities. Those are the type of leaders we should be looking for and supporting and putting our faith in.

Finally, Psalm 72 turns to leaders and followers together, as a single people under God, saying, “May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.”

In other words, the result of such faithful leadership is unity among all people. God created us as a diverse and numerous people – people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, different religious and moral beliefs, people who are rich, people who are poor, and people who are just getting by.

We all don’t have to be rich, the poor will always be among us, as Jesus says, and most people do get by in life somewhere right in the middle. God’s vision for a world such as this is that we would treat each other as the servant leaders God created us to be. And that means looking for ways to help the person next to us, no matter how rich or poor we may be, no matter how big or small, no matter how young or old we may be. It’s that simple.

My former boss Vince Pettinelli wrote two books in his career. He wrote the first book as he was amassing his wealth and power. It was titled “Human Services Management that Works.” He wanted to share his values and his success with other service providers, even those in competition with him. He wrote the second book at the end of his career, as a millionaire, no doubt. His second book was titled “Uneasy Choices: An Insider’s Guide to Selecting the Right Professionals to Care for a Loved One.”

As wealthy and successful as he became, Vince continued to focus on the needs of others. It’s a reflection of who we are called to be as Christians, as followers of Christ.

Jesus never became wealthy or powerful by earthly standards, but rather, he was counted among the poorest and lowest of humankind, giving all that he was for the sake of others, for the sake of us.

We don't have to be rich and powerful to do good. Likewise, being of meager means or poor condition does not leave one without the ability and the responsibility to give of oneself for the sake of others.

In Christ, we are all called to give what we have, lead as we are able, and to share and celebrate in the blessings that come to all of society as a result of our faithful service. When it is God's justice and righteousness that leads the day, we can be certain that it will be a good day – not only for ourselves, but for all people. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

The holiday is over but the work of Christmas is just beginning. Guide us, loving God, as we follow in the footsteps of Christ, born to us anew in the Spirit of Peace, Hope, Love and Joy. Grant us the grace to fashion our lives so that others might know that we have knelt in Bethlehem and worshiped the newborn king.

On the threshold of this new year, let us remember to follow the star instead of the crowd. If we lose our way, help us to remember, O God, the angel songs and the gift born to us in the darkness of night and in the depth of winter, that we might have life and have it abundantly.

As the light from the star guided the wise men of old, let your love shine from within us to encircle and embrace all those who have lost their way.

We also pray for those in need of your loving and healing presence, especially for Hilary Lewis, for Bill and Judy and for Hilary's mother, Dana Roscoe. We pray your healing touch upon Mary Havenhill, Tim and Connie Barker, Ruby James, and all those we continue to hold in prayer at this time.

We pray all this in the name of the one who calls us to new life, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**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.
Amen.**