

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
November 23, 2014  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Matthew 25:31-46

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

## ROYALTY?

Normally, if we think of Jesus wearing a crown, it is a crown of thorns. We do not frequently envision him as a royal figure. And yet, on this last Sunday before the season of Advent, that is how he is described in our scripture passages. Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, it says he had “nowhere to lay his head,” but in this passage, he is described as seated on the royal throne as king. The one who earlier in the gospel account had been rejected by even his own hometown is later exalted as ruler and judge of humanity as a whole. The one who at the beginning of his ministry resisted the temptation to throw himself down from the temple, having to depend upon the mercy of angels to catch him, is depicted as elevated above all earthly temples as being in command of all the angels. What kind of king is this Jesus?

The Matthew account is one of extremes. Readers are invited to imagine the glory of the reign that would be given to Jesus by God. He sits on a heavenly throne surrounded by angels. All of the people throughout time are before him to be assessed. They are not judged by how famous or rich or powerful they had been. They are not judged by how often they had gone to church or prayed, although I’m a little uneasy about pointing that out. It is hard to imagine the regal vision of Christ on the cosmic throne being the One who totally identifies with the person waiting out in the cold at the end of the line to the soup kitchen. His connection with the undocumented immigrant or the person who languishes in prison is absolutely clear, even in his glorified state. With the Jesus we have come to know, how could it be otherwise?

The congregation I served in Atlanta was involved with a ministry to the homeless that was housed in another Presbyterian church. There were several different teams of people who each went one evening each month to prepare dinner and do laundry for men who were generally disabled in some way. The volunteers had gotten tied to doing that form of ministry for a variety of reasons. One of them told me that he worked with the men because his brother struggled with mental illness and was at times wandering from one homeless shelter to the next. He had tried unsuccessfully to keep up with what was going on with his brother, who would only occasionally be in contact with anyone in the family. So this guy’s motivation for serving men who were homeless was that it allowed him to imagine that one of them was his brother. Indeed, in a way, they all were his brothers.

But Jesus the teacher takes it further than that in this last verbal lesson he offers in Matthew. He says when we offer the needy food, drink, clothing, or when we welcome, take care of, or visit them, we have done more than we realized. Jesus claims: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Far too often the core of Christianity is described solely by doctrine, what we believe about God. We’ve been taught that faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ opens the way for believers to get to go to heaven when they die. It always bothered me a bit that through belief in the least self-centered person to have ever lived we would be doing something that was in our ultimate best interest. That left me asking, is what we believe used in order to serve Jesus or in serving ourselves?

Now there are other scripture passages in other gospels that speak to the importance of faith. But here in Matthew is a challenge to the notion that we will ultimately be judged solely on our creeds instead of on our deeds. Faith is still the subject here; it just has skin on it and we see that compassion is as its heart. When we see pangs that come with hunger or thirst, the loneliness of the stranger, the exposure of the naked, the frailty of the sick, the isolation of the prisoner, Christian faith does not allow us to follow the path of heartless inaction. Yes, it is still faith that is described here in Matthew – an active one. This is far more than just a moral standard that Jesus is establishing here.

He says all who treat those who are considered to be at the bottom of society with compassionate dignity are actually treating their Lord in that way. In his life, Jesus closely associated with those who had pressing needs. He treated them as members of his own family. He experienced some of those needs himself. But he goes beyond all of that in teaching that if we are to serve him, we are to serve those in need, as if they were members of our family, as if they were the Lord himself.

As Jesus described those who had responded with compassion to those who were in need, they were not motivated by any realization that they were serving the Lord by doing what they had done. They were not trying to earn their way to heaven. The ones they served were not people who would probably be able one day to return the favor. That was not the force that shaped their reason for action. They simply had so internalized what Jesus had taught, that they naturally externalized it in how they related to others. They expressed their gratitude unto God for whatever blessings they had experienced by being a conduit for God's blessings to others. They had been blessed by God with a compassion that defined their lives.

To live in a way where we not only get to feel compassion, but also get to alleviate suffering is a blessing from God. Some want to cut themselves off from other people's pain. It does get to be a lot sometimes. But we show ourselves to be followers of Jesus Christ by giving of ourselves. That opportunity to give is part of the blessing we receive.

There are many of you who have dropped a bit of faith, hope, and love into our food barrel which is inscribed with the "I was hungry" words from our Matthew passage. Many give to our deacons' fund, which provides for those who come to the church seeking food assistance. Our two cents a meal offering and our regular church budget which you support enables us to make significant contributions to a number of organizations that minister to those in need. There are many who have rolled up your sleeves as volunteers. Last night, there were volunteers who took food and served it to the homeless women who live at Rainbow Place. There are others who serve meals on wheels, who refurbish houses, who offer disaster assistance, who support innovative ways to address the needs of the poor and disenfranchised in various ways in partnership with our overseas mission co-workers. Others have been involved with care for the sick or those who have suffered loss. This is no back-patting exercise. It is recognition that to be able to live in this way is a blessing. Some of you were safely operating only within in your comfort zone until the gift of compassion broke down the walls. It is a blessing to see faith with skin on it. I dare say that some of you have grown in faith as you served those in need. Hearts have come alive. It is wonderful to experience this kind of blessing from the Lord.

What kind of king is Jesus? This heavenly monarch, who in our reading from Ephesians is described as having been placed by God “above all rule and authority and power and dominion,” as being “above every name,” who as the head of the church, does not look to stay in a cushy celestial throne room isolated from those who suffer, but instead so closely identifies with the most vulnerable that when we minister to them, we are ministering to him – this is the One whose reign we celebrate. He is the king who willingly blesses his followers with a majestic compassion that connects us deeply with others and can be a life-giving force within us. He is the One who saves us from a faith that has no relevance for our lives. He is the king who saves us from being indifferent, apathetic, self-serving, clueless people who have nothing to live for beyond ourselves. He is a king who has earned our loyalty and everlasting gratitude, who conquers all kinds of hellishness in people’s lives and opens the gates of heaven now and forevermore. He is a king we get to serve in ministering to those in need. What do we say to a king like Jesus? I hope we say, “Reign in our hearts and in our lives forevermore.” Alleluia! Amen.