

Colossians 1: 3-20
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
November 21, 2010

In the Christian spiritual calendar, today is “Christ the King” Sunday. It is the day when we gather to renew our understanding of and commitment to Jesus who is the ruler of our lives and the life of the world. It is relatively easy to say in a free land where the right to be a Christian is supported by culture and constitution. It is especially easy to say “Christ is King”, or the perhaps more familiar version which we see on bumper stickers and roadside billboards, “Jesus is Lord.” Here in the assembly of believers. But in the ease of making this affirmation lies its danger.

After all, what do we mean by such a statement?

To the first Christians who dared publicly to affirm Christ as King or Jesus as Lord, this was a life threatening statement. It was an act of treason against the Roman Emperor. To the Romans emperor was a god and the cult of the emperor was jealously and rigorously protected. The divinity of the emperor was the capstone of the political and military stability of the empire. In the emperor “god” was an absolute ruler who tolerated no rivals and ruthlessly punished all who did not recognize his authority.

To claim that “Jesus is Lord” or “Christ is King” was to place oneself in direct opposition to the ultimate authority of the emperor and the entire Roman order.

Thousands of early Christians died for this public belief.

In the United States we pride ourselves on the constitutional separation of church and state. We, and every other religion—in theory at least—are free to practice our religion however we please without government interference. Yet this very separation creates a spiritual danger. After all, if I can profess that Jesus is Lord without fear of being thrown in jail what does it mean? Doesn't the force of the affirmation lose its power? It seems to me that over the years the phrase, "Jesus is Lord" has become less of a courageous witness than a slogan.

The other, more subtle danger is that with the separation of church and state we can affirm the authority of the national government in our secular lives *and* the rule of Jesus in our private and moral lives. We hold the two together without apparent contradiction. And yet, as disputes about abortion and human sexuality, war, racism and economic injustice demonstrate, the line between personal and public morality is confusing indeed. What is a citizen of the United States who is a Christian to do?

On Christ the King Sunday I proclaim to you with absolute clarity and certainty...I ...don't...know. And the dilemma comes from God revealed in Jesus. God is not and never has been a supporter of the separation of church and state. God wants and has always wanted our *entire* allegiance. In God there is no secular public self and sacred private self. God is One. We may identify God as having three dimensions—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this is simply a way of speaking of God's way of being in relationship with God's creation. God is undivided; one Being with no distinction between public and private, sacred and secular—it is all sacred.

So God does not want part of us. God wants *all* of us. God does not want our Sunday observance and concedes the rest of this day and the rest of the week to the life of

the world. God wants all of our lives. God wants all of our relationships, our work, our play, our very selves to be under his rule. On Christ the King Sunday we acknowledge this fact with all of its confusing implications.

Frankly, I don't get very far by tackling this thorny issue head on. I prefer to say out loud that as much as I love my country, my highest allegiance is to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This affirmation brings me great relief. Having declared my allegiance I know where I stand. It is now God's job, by the Holy Spirit to let me know when the values and priorities of God's kingdom have a higher claim on my life and conscience than that of my country. Thus, while I declared my self as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War I have come to respect, honor and advocate for those whose faith in God led them to fight. In short God's will is bigger than God's will *for me*. Christians are needed everywhere and especially in places that are dangerous and morally murky This includes law, business, politics and even...churches.

Instead, I find it more helpful to explore *who* this Jesus is who I call Lord and King of my life. It is here that the words of Paul to the Colossians speak to me deeply. Let's listen to Paul's words again.

He (Jesus) is the (visible) image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.

If you were to ask me what I believe about Jesus, this would be it. By faith I believe that when God wanted to show humanity his full and true self he sent Jesus.

When God wanted to show humanity what his priorities and values were he sent Jesus. When God wanted to reveal to humanity the full extent of his love for all of creation he sent Jesus. When God wanted to make clear the true relationship between god and humanity he sent Jesus.

I am annoyed sometimes when I see the bumper sticker, “Jesus is the answer;” and I wittily retort, “What’s the question?” But in truth, the older I get the truer that statement is for me. Jesus is the one stop shop for all my questions and concerns. He is the central reference desk, the counselor, teacher, guide, and authority. For everything that matters to me. And I willingly hand over to him any pretensions I have to understand anything apart from what I learn from him—form his teaching, his example, his life, his death and his rising from the dead.

I may be distressed about the state of the world, and I am. But the only way I know of participating in the healing of the world is to be a citizen of the realm where Christ is King and to trust with my life and path to him who has reconciled “to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven , by making peace through the blood of the cross. Amen.