

After 11 months, we are finally saying goodbye to the theme of the Big Table. I was at a preaching conference this week at Princeton Seminary, and when I told my colleagues that I'm doing a sermon series that lasted 11 months, they said, aren't your people tired of it by now? I said, I don't know. I've never asked them. Either way, it's over today. Next week is Christ the King Sunday, and it's also Thanksgiving. Normally, I just normally ignore Thanksgiving in worship because it's an American holiday, not a Christian one. But this year, I really wanted to talk about gratitude. So, we are doing the readings for Christ the King Sunday today, and we'll do a whole service on gratitude next week.

Of all the holidays of the Christian Church, Christ the King is the least celebrated and perhaps that's because it is the most recently established. It was until 1925 that Pope Pius XI established this feast when he saw that earthly governments were becoming more nationalistic. The world was still recovering from the devastating effects of the Christian nationalism of World War I. All the while a new nationalism was brewing in the form of fascism. As you probably know, Christian Nationalism is on the rise in our country, those who wish to see a Christian theocracy imposed across this land. Christian Nationalism was what enabled people who stormed the capital on January 6 to wave signs that said, "Christ is King." Witnessing this causes many of us to wonder why should I even stay Christian if this is what I'm associated with?

The earliest summary of the gospel was not, "God loves you" or "your sins are forgiven." The earliest summary of the gospel for those first Christians was "Jesus is Lord," which is to say, "Jesus is king." It was a political statement as well as a faith statement, because in the first century Roman Empire, there already was a lord and his name was Caesar. Caesar is the one who brought peace on earth, and he wasn't interested in entertaining rivals, certainly not with a Jew from Galilee. To say, "Jesus is Lord" was to say that Caesar was not. To be a Christian is put one at odds with political powers of coercion in this world. Those of you who would like to keep all politics out of the pulpit misunderstand what Christianity is. Though God not partisan, following Jesus has implications for this world, including our politics. The early Christians understood that. Some of them died for it. We need to understand this as well.

What does it mean to say, Jesus is Lord? If we think back over these past 11 months, Jesus has a clear message, a platform. His first words in the Gospel of Luke are that he has come to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This is his mission statement, and he never deviates from it. Jesus is always bringing more people to the table. He brings healing to the sick, and inclusion to the outcast. He sets free those beset by shame and dignifies the oppressed. The people we think could never belong are given VIP treatment. Of course, not everyone likes this mission, do they? Amid this radical inclusive love that Jesus proclaims, there is resistance by those in power. They like the seating arrangement as it is, themselves at the head of

the table, others looking to them, some as waiters and most people not invited at all. Those in power are not interested in sharing it but in maintaining it.

So, when it becomes clear to the powerful that Jesus is a threat to the status quo, they respond swiftly and lethally. Who is the most famous person to ever receive the death penalty at the hands of the state? It's Jesus. But we often don't think of him that way, do we? We are so used to thinking that Jesus had to die, as though everything was preordained by God that we forget who exactly put him to death. The Roman Empire executes Jesus as a warning to anyone who would dare threaten their sovereignty. And if you had any doubt as to their intentions, they put a sign over Jesus' head that makes it clear, "This is the king of the Jews." Of course, they say this to mock him, but it's mockery with a message. This is what happens to those who stand up to our Empire. Anyone who threatens king Caesar, ends up like this. That was just common sense. Who had a better claim to being king, Caesar or a Jewish peasant from Galilee who is busy loving people? And yet 2000 years later, you won't find a single person celebrating Caesar the king Sunday. Jesus' kingdom of forgiveness and inclusion endures today, while the Roman Empire is part of our history books. How did that happen?

Something happened on that cross that changed the world forever, such that we can never understand power the same way again. "When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.'" Two weeks ago, you sang *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, and there's a line in that hymn that says, "The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure for lo his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him." When Fred Rogers was a student at Pittsburgh seminary, before he became Mr. Rogers, he asked his professor Dr. William Orr, what is that one word that will fell evil itself? Orr said, "Forgiveness. Evil simply disintegrates in the presence of forgiveness."

When evil itself was seeking to undo God's chosen One, the one who has come to set us free, he speaks the one word that no one could ever expect or anticipate, the word that even though we've heard it a thousand times we cannot hear it enough, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." These words are eternally significant. They cover everyone and everything. The radical message of the gospel is not that a good man died at the hands of an Empire. The radical message is that God in Christ speaks the last word of forgiveness, and it cannot be unspoken. These words reverberate across the cosmos to this day and will throughout eternity.

What these words reveal is that it wasn't just Jesus who died on the cross that day. What also dies is the notion that God is vindictive, that God is angry with you or looking for reasons to punish you or anyone else. When Jesus looks upon those who are putting him to death and says, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do" nothing can ever be the same again. The heart of God is revealed right here, and it is one of unconditional, unlimited forgiveness. That forgiveness is true, whether you

believe it or not. Most who were there that day did not. The religious leaders scoffed. The soldiers mocked. One of the criminals joined in the fun from his cross. Most of us don't see, yet the word endures and cannot be unspoken.

Christ the king reveals to us that true power is not the power to coerce and get one's one way. It's not the power to seize control of the government and install a theocracy and make everyone Christian. The power revealed in the cross is the power of forgiveness. It looks so weak in the face of the world, in the face of overwhelming evil. But when we see it, that which looks so strong, so inevitable crumbles. What's left is radiant divine love. Somehow the other criminal on the cross sees through what's going on. He sees Jesus for who he is and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He sees the king has come to set us free from evil itself, not by a show of force but by an act of love. That's true power.

Jesus is king, but he is unlike any king we have ever known. His last word reveals to us in the most dramatic way possible that there is no one who is unwanted at God's table. If those who are putting Jesus to death are welcomed, then that means everyone else is too—those with whom you agree, and those with whom you fervently disagree—all are forgiven, included, and loved. Evil will not get the last word, for the one word of forgiveness will fell evil at the last. The table is set for all. When you come into this place of worship, come knowing that all are welcomed here, even you. You are forgiven. You are loved, and nothing can unspeak this last word. Amen.