

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
November 26, 2017
Christ the King
Luke 23:33-43

What a weekend! Yesterday ended our fundraising for 2017 with our amazing annual Christmas Fair and today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year! This time next week, a new church year begins with the first Sunday in Advent.

So we crown off the church year today with a feast that only came into being less than one hundred years ago. Introduced into the church calendar by Pope Pius XI in 1925, the feast of Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ, was a response to the rise of secularization, atheism, and communism.

Don't we all follow someone, a passion, or some ideology? Whether we are committed to chasing the almighty buck, seeking fame, or pursuing our own pleasure, everyone is committed to someone, or something. And as Christians, we've been offered a path and a person to commit to that supports life, even beyond death.

So this Sunday is an opportunity to commit ourselves, yet again, to following Jesus and allowing God to rule our hearts. Not in a submissive, victim way, but in a beautifully surrendered way. A way in which we open our hearts, we make room for Love, love finds a home in us and the love of God shines through.

For many people these days, commitment has become a dirty word. To them, it restricts personal freedom and expression. It closes life down, it doesn't open it up.

But for people who want to follow Jesus, commitment is a beautiful thing. It *is* the door to freedom. Because the One we are follow never betrays us, never abandons us, and never abuses our trust. So held in this relationship, we are free to be more authentic, courageous, and generous. We are given what we need, and we share what we have been given.

So let's look at today's gospel reading. In it we hear the story of a man who is the antithesis of someone who pursues power and wealth, status and his own self-interest. Jesus, to his dying breath, is alive to those around him. Despite his physical agony, despite having being abandoned by most of his friends, despite mocked and humiliated, Jesus holds to the bigger picture. He is able to stay focused on what he is asked to do by the One he is committed to. To love. And Jesus forgives.... not once, but twice. He forgives those who crucify him, and soon after, the criminal crucified to one side of him.

Now this is a person I can follow. Someone who in the depth of pain does not lash out. Who does not condemn. Who does not insist of being right. Who does not take revenge.

No, this person who had every right to curse and condemn, does the opposite – he loves and forgives. He is able to see into the hearts of those who create misery and pain for those around them. He is love incarnate.

This past week I had a phone call from an old friend I haven't connected with for over a year. She told me of the agony she's been through. She had an affair. And woke up one day and realized what a mistake she had made. The most difficult thing for her to deal with is to face the pain she has caused her husband. And it's been

excruciating to face the shame as she acknowledges her not only her selfishness, but her terrible weakness. She accepts full responsibility and has asked for forgiveness, from God, from her husband, and finally she has been able to forgive herself. As someone else told me this week, if you can accept that God has forgiven you, but don't forgive yourself - then how is it that your judgment holds more weight than God's?!

Just like the criminal hanging on the cross beside Jesus who asked to be remembered, my friend was able to remember herself that she is a child of God, and asked as well to re-enter into His world, his kingdom. Where no one, and nothing, is lost. All is held in love. So her life has begun anew. She can't go back to how it was. But building on the wisdom her pain has taught her, and in the sure knowledge that she is loved, she finds herself able to wake up every day, incredibly grateful, and ready to live life to its fullest.

Back to the gospel. The first criminal hanging beside Jesus on his own cross could not see who Jesus was. Just like the ones who had nailed Jesus to the cross, this man had an idea of what the Messiah should look like, and couldn't see the profound love and total obedience Jesus had, mistook kindness for weakness, and missed the opportunity to transcend the cross. Stuck in worldly ideas, the executioners, and this one criminal, were blind to the greatest expression of love there is.... to live and die surrendered to love, to God. What a powerful, life-changing example of love. Of love in the face of evil, destruction and death.

When we are not understood in the way we would like; when we have been hurt, how do we respond? Are we focused on being right? Do we insist on being heard?

I think of someone in my extended family. As a young mom, this woman's husband and her father had an argument. A big one. And they stopped talking to each other. For years, this young woman had to navigate their pig headedness. Neither was going to admit they had made a mistake by putting their opinions before their relationship. Each was so entrenched in their own story of how they were justified in their behaviour and indignantly demanded, and waited for, the other's apology. Family gatherings were awkward, her father was not allowed in the family home, the grandchildren were often put in the middle, and the tension grew, rather than diminished, as the years went by. Finally, the mom developed breast cancer, and still those stubborn men didn't relent. I believe they managed to put this woman, whom they both claimed to love, on the cross. All by herself. While they huffed and puffed in their self-righteousness.

Today we take a moment to decide who and what we are following. Every day we choose whether or not to live into this Love that will transform us in ways we can't ask for, or imagine.

We are asked to practice keeping our eyes and ears open? Can we see the love in the most painful of events? Do we trust that even our most regretful decisions can be composted into new life?

That's why I'm here today, before you, preaching. Not because I'm someone special, (we all are!) but because I experienced a kind of love and forgiveness I never knew existed. That love allowed me to change and open up. I don't know about you, but when I screw up and

I expect anger and judgment, and only experience love and acceptance, I want more. That's why I'm here.... to remind you, and myself, that we are a loved people, a cherished people, and we can live into that reality. Day by day. When you forget, I see it as my job to remind you – you are not alone, you are loved, and you are needed.

When I listen to the stories from the bible, and when I hear stories from others who follow Jesus - I am hungry to get to know Him better. When I look at my own life, my heart melts with gratitude.

So come, open your hearts - say “Lord,” or “King” or whatever you feel comfortable calling that force of Love that is calling you here Sunday after Sunday.

And bring your hunger for love, forgiveness and holiness to the table this morning. Open your hearts, even in the midst of pain, shame, fear or confusion..... because this banquet has been spread for you.

Amen.