

Christ the King

In the musical Hamilton, I think one of the most interesting relationships is between Alexander Hamilton and George Washington. Hamilton is his right hand man. Washington sees Hamilton's brilliance and knows how much the fledgling revolutionary army needs him. But Washington also knows Hamilton can be a hot head. In one scene, Hamilton encourages a duel between one of his friends and General Lee because Lee had openly criticized George Washington. Washington enters the scene after Lee has been shot in the leg and demands to know what's going on.

Hamilton tells George Washington that they were standing up for him. Washington says he doesn't need anyone to do that and he's plenty big enough to take criticism. Hamilton, never one to back down from an argument, starts a heated exchange with George Washington. However, Washington is the one character in the show that Hamilton knows not to mess with.

The exchange finally ends when Washington sends Hamilton home to his family. When Hamilton tries to protest, Washington emphatically ends the conversation by saying, "Go home Alexander. That's an order from your commander."

Today is the Sunday that Christians all over the world observe as Christ the King Sunday or, to make it gender neutral, the Reign of Christ Sunday. Christ the King Sunday was instituted by Pope Pius (the eleventh) in 1925. And he chose to specifically designate a Sunday that calls for Christians the world over to remember that our ultimate loyalty and allegiance is to Christ and not to any earthly power precisely because of what was going on in the world in 1925. The year before, Joseph Stalin came to power in Russia. 1925 was the year that Hitler published Mein Kemp and started to gain a strong following in Germany. And in early January of 1925, in Pope Pius' back yard, Mussolini, who had been prime minister for three years, in essence declared himself dictator claiming that he had "absolute power."

Against this backdrop of the rise of global fascism, the pope wanted to remind Christians that no human has a right to the claim of absolute authority and that the ultimate allegiance for Christians is not to any political leader, party, or even nation. The ultimate allegiance is to Christ. Christ is king.

The Scripture Ann read earlier has become the scripture used every year by churches that observe Christ the King Sunday. And for good reason. The Scripture begins with this image of Jesus sitting on the throne with the nations gathered before him awaiting his judgment. And what follows is a story that Jesus' hearers would have recognized, with one very important twist. In Jesus' day those who were sick, or poor, or disabled were believed to be in that condition because they or their parents had sinned. In other words, it was their own fault. But on the other

hand, those who were well, those who were wealthy, were believed to be in that condition because God was rewarding them for their righteousness. They were blessed. It was common to separate people like Jesus' does in the parable:

Sheep and goats

Righteous and sinful

Good and bad.

But Jesus completely flipped it on its head. The people who were often thought of as sinful, as bad, as the goats are the ones who become the measuring stick for the rest of us. To be righteous, you have to care for those who are in need – the sick, the hungry, the prisoner, the thirsty. But Jesus goes one step further than saying we have to care for them. He identifies with them. Jesus says, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me."

What is so radical about what Jesus says is that he goes much further than simply saying he wants us to help the poor. He says that he is the poor. He is the hungry. He is the prisoner. He is the refugee.

The founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day, understood this mystery of Jesus being found in the poor better than almost anyone. Catholic Worker houses, which still exist today provide meals and shelter for those who need it. They truly try to see Jesus in every person that comes to their homes. Seeing Jesus in the poor was central to Dorothy Day's theology and central to the mission of the Catholic worker. Day wrote:

"The mystery of the poor is this: That they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for him. It is the only way we have of knowing and believing in our love."

Remember that this Scripture where Jesus says that what we do for the least of these, we do for him began with the image of Jesus as king and it continues with the incredible claim that we always find Jesus, the king, living amongst the most vulnerable, the most hurting, the most forsaken people in the world. Jesus, the king, is hanging out with the least of these. The king is both with the outcasts and the king has ordered his followers – us – to serve him by serving the most vulnerable people of society.

Now, I know that this idea of having a king goes against a lot of what we believe as congregationalists. We live in one of the seminal cities of the American Revolution where the founding leaders of Boston said, "Absolutely not" to the rule of a king. Our spiritual ancestors fled persecution because they didn't want any religious authority figure or body telling them what they had to believe or how they had to worship.

As congregationalists we are democratic. And we believe strongly in the priesthood of every believer. In fact, in our bylaws, it states that every person on our church “has the undisputed right to follow the Word of God according to their own conscience.” To be clear, I think this is a very good thing and there has been so much harm done in the name of religion when religious leaders try to tell you what you have to believe, how you must worship, or what rules you must follow.

But if there’s one thing that our faith seems to speak to with a wholly unified and consistent voice it’s that our Scripture, our theology, our faith all consistently demand that we care for the poor. There are over 2000 verses in the Bible that talk about caring for the poor. It’s the second most common theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus constantly talks about uplifting the poor – there’s 1 in 16 verses in the gospels that talk about it; 1 out of every 7 verses in the gospel of Luke. To put it simply, you just can’t read the Bible without seeing that our faith demands that we care for the poor. It is on virtually every page of Scripture.

And it seems to be the one thing that Jesus deems to be absolutely necessary for his followers to do. In the very same passage where Jesus claims to be king, the one thing he asks of his followers to do is care for the least of these.

So as much as we dislike the idea of kings. And as much as we like the idea of someone in power telling us what we have to believe or what we have to do. Perhaps Christ the King Sunday is a reminder to us that while we don’t ascribe absolute power to any human, we do look to Jesus as our Lord. We do see the values of Jesus as our standard. And we believe that the teachings of Jesus are our path to live out our faith.

So perhaps it is good for us as congregationalist to have one Sunday each year to remember that Jesus is our king. And just as he did 2000 years ago, he says to us, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.”

And this is an order from our commander.