

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 20, 2022 (Christ the King C)
Affirmation Sunday
Luke 23:33-43

The Archbishop of Paris once stood in the pulpit of Notre Dame Cathedral. He was there to preach a sermon, and his sermon was built around a story. Thirty years earlier, he said, there were three young tourists who had come into this very cathedral. All of the young men were rough, rude, and cynical persons, who thought that religion was a racket. Two of young men DARED the third to go into the confessional box and make a MADE-UP confession to the priest. The two bet that he didn't have the nerve to do it.

But that third young man WENT into the confessional box and tried to fool the priest. But the priest KNEW that what the young man was saying was a lie. There was a noticeable tone of ARROGANCE in the young man's voice, that didn't FIT the confession. So after HEARING the confession, the priest told the young man, "Very well, my son. Every confession requires a penance, and this is yours. I ask you to go into the chapel, stand before the crucifix, look into the face of the crucified Christ and say, 'All this you did for me, and I don't give a hoot (*damn*)!'" (Except, "hoot" wasn't the word he USED.)

The young man staggered out of the confessional to his friends, bragging that he had DONE as they dared. The other two INSISTED that he FINISH the performance by doing the penance. It was all a JOKE ANYWAY. This young man made his way into the chapel, stood before the crucifix, and began, "All this you did for me and I ... and I don't..." He looked up into the face of Christ, and tried again, "All this you did for me, and I don't give a ... I don't give...."

Then at this point in the story, the Archbishop of Paris leaned over the pulpit and said, "That young man was THIS man who stands before you to preach."

That's the miracle of the cross. When we begin to UNDERSTAND the LOVE ON that cross, our RELATIONSHIP with God CHANGES. We can't stay the SAME. We WANT God at the CENTER of our lives.

"All this you did for me..." This is Christ the King Sunday, the end of the year for the church. Next Sunday we begin a NEW church year with Advent, but on this LAST Sunday we reflect on the person behind it all: Christ the King. We don't USE language like this talk about Jesus very often, but Christ is INDEED a KING. He's the ULTIMATE king, the KING of kings. Even though, as we read in our Gospel, he REFUSED to ACT like one.

"All this you did for me..." Let's think about this a minute. Jesus was God, God himself, God the Almighty, God incarnate, God with us. He was the SAME God that created the UNIVERSE with just a WORD.

Now THINK about this INCARNATE God in the FLESH... being stripped and beaten and whipped. Think of the humiliation and pain of his crown of thorns. Picture this king carrying his own cross to Golgatha, so weak that he collapses on the ground, with the crowds laughing at him. Think of the cross, hanging there by spikes driven through his wrists, suffocating under his own weight, pulling himself up BY those wrists, just to catch a breath, mortally wounding himself a little MORE each time. Dying there on a cross like a common criminal.

What kind of king is that? By OUR standards, that's no KING at all. But it was THERE, in his DYING, that Jesus SHOWED just what KIND of king he WAS. By GOD'S standards, he was the KING of kings.

And what's astounding is that he COULD have SAVED himself, just as the mockers said. Jesus was GOD! He had the power to do or change ANYTHING he wanted. He could've ENDED it.

Just like that (snap finger), with merely a THOUGHT, it would've been OVER. He could have STOPPED the humiliation. He could have called down a LEGION of angels to put an end to it. He could have STOPPED the pain of watching the VERY people he came to save CALLING for, and MOCKING, his execution. He could have SAVED himself from that EXCRUCIATING death. But he didn't. Jesus COULD have SAVED HIMSELF, but he CHOSE to save US INSTEAD.

And even if you were the ONLY person on this earth, he STILL would have done that for YOU.

What kind of king is that? He's the KING of kings. Jesus CHOSE it, because he knew what it would MEAN for US. The cross of Jesus CHANGED EVERYTHING.

I love this quote from James Alison (Jesus the Forgiving Victim; Listening for the Unheard Voice).

The cross is Jesus SAYING, "...the only way I can get it across to you that I LIKE you is by occupying the very WORST space that any of you can come up with, a place which you TYPICALLY think I like to put people in. I DON'T. It's YOU who put people there, you at your very WORST. I'll OCCUPY that space to show you that I'm NOT out to get you, that I really DO like you. The moment you SEE that, then you can relax, and trust my GOODNESS. Then you need no longer engage in that AWFUL business of making yourselves GOOD over AGAINST, or by COMPARISON with each other. Instead you can RELAX about being good, and AS you relax, you will find yourselves becoming something much BETTER, much RICHER in HUMANITY than you can POSSIBLY imagine."

By dying on that cross, Jesus turned the world on its head. The WEAKEST thing there is in our world is to die. But the most POWERFUL thing that JESUS did, the most powerful thing he COULD have done, was to DIE. And not just ANY death; he died a criminal's death, a HUMILIATING death. Christ's WEAKNESS COULD have been the END of Christianity, but INSTEAD it was the BEGINNING. Christ's weakness COULD have proved that he WASN'T the Messiah, but INSTEAD it proved that he WAS.

And BECAUSE of what Christ has done, YOUR BAPTISM, and the baptism of EVERY Christian, of every generation of EVERY time and place, turns the STANDARDS of this WORLD on their head. In WEAKNESS, in the weakness of a child in baptism, in the weakness of being COMPLETELY dependent upon God, in the FOOLISHNESS of the cross, THERE IS POWER; there's LIFE. IN JESUS, God comes to us in our WEAKNESS, because we don't have the STRENGTH to come to GOD.

We have a king that came to US so that we could SEE God, see what LOVE LOOKS like. This is a king that made HIMSELF WEAK so that WE could be STRONG, a king that DIED so that WE could LIVE, a king that walks WITH us IN our lives.

EVERY day we wake to a new choice: We can join the CROWDS that MOCK Jesus and say, "All this you did for me, and I don't give a HOOT." Or we can look at his FACE ON that cross, and say "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And that's why we CELEBRATE today, on this AFFIRMATION Sunday, because TODAY these 9 young men and women will MAKE THAT CHOICE. Today, they will stand before us, and CHOOSE JESUS, choose LOVE, choose FAITH.

Annabelle, Carson, Hannah, Theo, Lyla, Jake, Seth, Jack and Camden, we couldn't be more proud of you, as you affirm your faith in Christ the King. Amen.