

November 20, 2016 Christ the King Sunday, Stewardship Sunday III
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 23:33-43

The King of Love

I was getting ready for a Sunday earlier this year, it was late in the week and I wasn't sure about my plans for the children's sermon, I wasn't sure I had something of interest to little ones—or comprehensible to them. I told my husband, "I'm thinking about my children's sermon and I'm afraid it's too complicated, may be aimed more at adults." Tim replied, deadpan, without skipping a beat, "Oh you think your children's sermons are for the children?" (He's a wonderfully supportive partner.) Of course I am well aware that adults often listen in to the children's sermons, and I try not to read too much into it when after worship people tell me, "I really liked your CHILDREN's sermon today..."

That children's sermon I was mulling over concerned the gospel reading for that Sunday, which was from Luke, like today's gospel reading is, but it was from several chapters earlier from the reading we just heard. (It's maybe surprising that we heard just heard that reading today, the gospel reading about Jesus on the cross.) This other gospel was about hearts and treasures—maybe you know that one? The reason I was hesitant about trying to explain it in the children's sermon is that it's a verse that adults often get confused. Adults often think that what Jesus says about hearts and treasure is: "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be, also." Which would be to say: we love something, and so that's where we invest ourselves. But what Jesus says is actually the opposite. What Jesus says is: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus says the investing, the acting, the doing is first, and then the feeling follows. Jesus says you need to make a decision to take up a behavior, act in a certain way, and then your heart follows, your heart finds value there."

I had my doubts about whether the kids would get this, but I couldn't come up with anything better, so I went ahead with it. Also, I knew how much our kids like doing things, so, at the end of the Children's Sermon, I gave them all a bunch of pink paper hearts. I said, "Today let's put hearts in the offering plates, and let's have other people do it, too. Will you help me hand these paper hearts out, so that everyone here can put one in the offering plate?" And I had made a LOT of paper hearts to hand out, and the children took up the task with fervor. The children's sermon ended and they went up and down the aisles, and then up and down the aisles again, they were still moving in and out of the pews, reaching any and every one, even people in in hard to reach locations, and the children were making a second round, giving people another heart, even if they'd already gotten one, the children were moving in and out of the pews, crawling over knees, handing out hearts to everybody, well into my "adult sermon" ...

Did the children get it? Doubtful, but they showed us what God is like: with their eagerness, their relentlessness, their active giving away, and again, all of it so like what does, the love that God gives away, to everyone, in even the toughest locations, even and especially then.

Take today's gospel reading. Surprising, maybe, to hear this story on the cusp of Thanksgiving and Advent, surprising, maybe, to have as today's gospel the crucifixion. We hear that reading today because today marks the end of the church year, the Sunday of Christ the King and this is the kind of king Jesus is: He wears a crown of thorns. He is surrounded by bystanders, indifference, and cynicism, scoffing comments. He's stripped of his "royal" robe, for which people cast lots. And faced with that, with the worst the world could do to him, this is

what he says: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That’s the kind of king we have, a king who loves to the end, past the end. On this last Sunday of the church year, with his very last breath, he says this: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” This is the kind of king that Jesus is, a king who responds to hate with love.

Dr. King preached that, that was the great power the civil rights movement: in the face of discrimination and violence, to respond with nonviolence and openness to the other. We need that same movement today. We have no shortage of bystanders, and hecklers, and people casting lots, and people hurling cynical comments on where we find ourselves and what can save us.

This is what the gospel says: Jesus, priceless treasure, put himself on a cross. That generosity is the very heart of God. In Jesus God made this decision, took up this behavior: to be in solidarity with the suffering, to put himself right there in middle of it, to be hung right in the middle of it, even with us, we who are condemned justly. That’s what God shows us, invites us, gives us to do, also.

On that Sunday that our children passed out those paper hearts, at communion time I saw one of older members had tucked a pink heart into his lapel like a rose. And many, many paper hearts were put in the offering plate. After the service the tellers counted them, too, and showed them to me, many, many hearts, on one of them there a word was written: peace.

Take up the behavior of love, make a decision to be gracious, generous, open, forgiving, put your treasure there, and see your heart expand, for God has enabled us to share in this inheritance, rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.