

November 26, 2017 Christ the King, Addiction Awareness, Baptism of Catherine Johnson  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Matthew 25: 31-46

### **Governing Theme**

This is one of those Sundays there's a lot going on: dancers and streamers and a procession, a special focus on addiction, a baptism. One might well ask what holds it all together, all this going on, on this festival Sunday known as "Christ the King." I mention this Sunday's festival name with some hesitation, at risk of speaking to a specialized few, or maybe a "special" few, for unless you get excited about the finer, even technical, points of worship, unless you have a passion for the church liturgical calendar, unless you are a "liturg geek," you might not be aware that today is the last Sunday of the church year. Come next Sunday and it's Advent. But first, Christ the King, which, as it happens, prompts heated debate among people who are passionate about the liturgical calendar. Among liturg geeks—and I admit I am one—among such people there is debate about the appropriateness of Christ the King Sunday, "king" sounding like something from another time and place. Here in America, we don't have kings—that would be at odds with our inception and understanding of independence and smacks of patriarchy to boot. So why celebrate, name a Sunday after it? Sing hymns, hear scripture readings about it? The fact that the imagery is found throughout our holy writ and tradition is one reason, which I'll come back to, but before that, I want to explore another thing happening today, the focus on addiction, and how that might inform our understanding of Christ the King.

As you can see in the church's weekly schedule, we have a number of Alcoholics Anonymous or AA groups that meet here throughout the week, a number that increased sharply this fall, when six additional meetings were added. The additional meetings have been happening here now for several months, in the chapel and upstairs in the education wing, the new groups love the space, if not the stairs, they're happy to chat if you see them coming in or out of the building—anonymous doesn't mean unfriendly. Last week I talked more at length with one of their leaders, who first approached us about the increased partnership. I wanted to let her know we were having a Sunday with a focus on Addiction Awareness, we thought a Sunday at the start of the holiday season would be a good time for it, and I wanted to ask her, "What do we need to hear?"

"That it's all around you," she said. "I think there's hardly a family that hasn't been affected by addiction, whether a child or a parent, a sibling, a spouse. Sometimes people know about it, sometimes they don't, but we're surrounded by it. I'm sure members of your congregation have been affected by it. People you see in passing, on the street, you don't know them but they are affected by it. And it can do such horrible things, it can plunge people into such dark places; in the grips of it they hurt everyone around them, and themselves, and they can't stop."

She said that we should know "That it's a disease. That's the language we use at AA, alcohol addiction is a disease, and it's a disease on multiple levels: physical, of course, there are biological ways the body reacts, and different bodies react differently, but it's also a disease on an emotional level, and on a spiritual one."

She said, "That it takes over one's life. You think you are in control of it, but you are not. In time, everything you do is in service to the disease. It takes over, it rules your life, until you admit that you are powerless, until you surrender to the fact that your life has become unmanageable; until you admit that relief can only come from a higher power."

These are some guiding principles of AA, as you may know. AA has spiritual underpinnings, but is not overtly Christian, but I think what she said is so helpful to hear this

Sunday of Christ the King. Because it's not a festival of possible interest for a specialized few. It's not about outdated language or ways of thinking from which we've evolved. We may not have monarchs, but we all serve something: maybe alcohol, maybe status, or safety, or pleasure. There are so many powers competing for our allegiance, even creating addiction to them. Notice their addiction qualities: you can always receive more praise, you can never be too safe, you can always watch another episode. We can pretend we exist in another realm, beyond allegiances, we can pretend that, and watch our lives become unmanageable—or we can admit that we all serve something, and be clear what deserves it: Christ.

In the gospels, you won't find the word addiction, but it's clear that Jesus understood disease on multiple levels: physical, emotional, and spiritual. It is clear when you read stories of Jesus healing people: healings of bodies, which also included cleansing of soul and freeing of spirit. "Your faith has made you well," Jesus would often say, or even, "you sins are forgiven," healing and the human condition being something medical, and more than that, too.

The Bible and the first Christians understood titles on multiple levels, too. Unlike us, they did live in a time and place that was ruled by kings. There was the Roman Emperor, Caesar, who, to assert his power, regularly and casually wiped out nameless masses. There were also localized kings, like Herod, who murdered on a whim: because of a comment at a party, murdered babies, his own family, his own people. Back then everyone knew who the king was, what he did, and where he sat. And then this other person appeared, this traveling healer and teacher appeared among us. And he told strange stories about helping people, even people you don't know, simply because they are hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison; helping them, even when no one knows it, when you think no one is watching, helping even when you don't know who you are helping. There's that story, that we heard today, and there's many others that he told about a kingdom which is not of this world, but will come, a kingdom which is among us and in us. And he spoke about power, too, about who has it, and how it is shown: in humility, in being a servant.

And they kill him, in the most public and shameful of ways. He is the one who becomes accursed. They say, mockingly, "This is your king!" hang a sign with it above his throne, his cross. But even as this person, this person who is God hidden in plain sight, even as he surrenders to death, even as he himself experiences the darkest of places, he announces forgiveness and love. That's his rule. That's why we call him King, as did the first Christians, taking a term that is ever abused and redefining it, telling emperors of this world that there is a higher power.

"I have seen miracles happen," the woman from AA told me. "It's a strange process. Someone comes to a meeting at first, in a daze, lost, not even aware of what a mess they are in, but so full of self-doubt, so full of self-hate. The group says to them, 'We will love you until you learn to love yourself.' And over time a new person emerges. I've seen it, it's hard to explain, but in the surrender, in the acceptance of love, they become strong."

Is this not what Christ says to us? "I will love you, until you love yourself, until you love your neighbor as yourself, until you love your enemies, until there are no goats." Is this not what Christ does for us? Goes to the place of utter darkness and emerges a new person. Is this not what happens to us in baptism? United with Christ's death, the waters cleanse us, heal us, forgive us, and we emerge a new person. Hands are laid upon us and we hear a prayer for the gifts of the spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might—a prayer that echoes one often said in AA, that prayer for the gifts of serenity to accept, and courage to change, and wisdom. And then we are anointed with oil, as in days of old they anointed kings, we are anointed with oil, and marked with the sign of the cross, the sign God's loving power, above all, for us.