

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Pastor Bill Uetricht Christ the King 11/20/11

I know that many of you have been keeping up with the news that has been coming out of Penn State University, unsettling news about a football coach who, it is alleged, may have abused many boys. Now none of us knows what really happened there, and it is essential in our nation to remember that accused people are always presumed innocent until proven guilty. But if what is alleged is true we are being confronted with a very disturbing story. It's horrible whenever children are abused. It's particularly heinous when that abuse comes from a person in authority, a leader. Now honestly for children, that would be almost any adult. But when that adult is someone who has been entrusted with a position of great authority, the abuse is especially reprehensible. Now I say that knowing that I am in a position of authority, and it makes me nervous to realize that I may be held to a higher standard. I am well acquainted with how people can misuse those higher standards, how they can expect leaders not to be real people. But still, all in all, I understand why there are higher expectations for leaders. They have a lot of power--power to shape people's lives for good or evil. Leadership, then, really matters. What leaders do or don't do really matters.

Today—the day of Christ the King—is all about leadership. It's all about power and what power looks like in light of our leader, Christ our King. The day starts out with a confrontation with some leaders whom Ezekiel feels have really blown it. It starts out with the kings of Judah, called by Ezekiel and many others of his time “shepherds.” Ezekiel in a few verses prior to those which are our reading for today says, “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves. Should not

shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.”

In other words, God in Ezekiel is saying, you rich kings are taking advantage of your people. In the verse just prior to the one that starts our first lesson for today Ezekiel says the people, especially the poor and the fragile folks, have become food for the kings. (Probably the 99% versus the 1% analysis would resonate with Ezekiel.) The people work hard, and the kings get all the money. The kings are abusing their power; they are abusing their people. And God has had enough of that.

So in today’s reading God says that since the kings can’t do the job he is taking on the job himself. “*I myself* will search for my sheep. *I* will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered.” The reference here is to the exile, to a time in Israel’s history when many of their brightest and best, including Ezekiel, were sent from their homes to the foreign land of Babylon. God in Ezekiel is said to be on a search and rescue mission for his people because he cares about them, unlike the kings who care only about themselves, their treasury, their power. God is not like those kings. And he is taking over their job. He will be the shepherd of the sheep. And he is going to attend to the injured, the lost, the strayed, the weak, taking on the strong, while he does so. He is going to feed his land with justice.

Leadership matters so much to the God of Ezekiel that he is going to fill the leadership position himself. And that filling will mean that a new sheriff is in town and a whole new way of doing things has arrived. The forgotten will be remembered. The hungry will be fed. The injured will be healed. The weak will be empowered. God’s leadership will mean a brand new world. The lowly will be elevated, and the elevated will be brought low. God’s leadership will bring hope to all of God’s

people, not just to the ones who have power and money. In other words, our God has a heart for justice. He has a heart for people who seem to not be able to find their way, people who feel scattered, people who are left out, people who are injured by life, people who find it hard to put one foot in front of the other. Our shepherd is a leader who is not lining his pockets, building his empire or portfolio. Our leader is reaching out to hurting human beings.

Our gospel lesson from Matthew today, in its reference to hurting and needy human beings is quite telling. In what is the last teaching section of Matthew, Jesus speaks of the judgment of the nations. And interestingly enough, the judgment is based on how the nations have responded to hurting human beings, how they have responded to those in need. Jesus tells us that our response to those in need is a response to him. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” When we do or don’t respond to those in need, those who are hungry, those who are imprisoned, those who are strangers, those who are sick, we are responding or not responding to Christ himself.

The parable about the judgment of the nations of the world is telling us that Christ is discovered in those who are in need. We meet him as we meet people who are in need. In many ways, he is the one whose belly is empty. He is the one who is sitting in a jail cell. He is the one who is the immigrant, the visitor in our church or home, the awkward child, the sexually different, the victim of sexual abuse, the autistic boy, the strange one, the visitor in our midst. Our God is a leader who not only has a heart for the hurting; he is the hurting. He is the lowly. He is the stranger. He is the hungry.

The context of Matthew's sheep and goat story reveals quite a bit. This parable precedes the story of the death of Jesus. It comes right before we are given the most graphic picture imaginable of our king--a graphic picture that reveals to us the rejected one, the suffering one, the abused one, one bloodied by life and by people. Our leader is the hurting one. Our leader is the naked, the hungry, the vulnerable, the different, the crucified.

Wow! In the realm where this leader leads life is very different. In the realm where this king rules, power looks very different, which is precisely why Jesus tells the story that he does in today's gospel reading. He doesn't tell it so that we know who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. He tells it so that in this world, this world where he reigns, power may be used not to abuse, but to heal; power may be used not to boss people around, but to lead them to hospitality, to friendship, to food, to inclusion in a community, to forgiveness, to hope, to grace. Jesus tells all about sheep and goats so that power may be utilized to lift the lowly, strengthen the weak, give direction to the lost, enliven the depressed, calm the sick and the dying. Jesus tells us this story so that power may be employed not to hurt children but to protect them, and more than protect them, to prepare them for lives of loving service.

God is our shepherd. Christ is our king. Christ is our leader. When he leads, it is a whole new world! When he leads, we who follow are very different people. For us who are shaped by Christ the king, us who follow the crucified Christ, life isn't about grasping power for the sake of control; but it is about allowing our power to be used for the sake of a hurting and needy world.