

Ruler of Our Lives©
Luke 23:33-43 **November 25, 2018** **Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

With our theme this month being on trusting God enough to make commitments to Him – both financially and with our time and talents – I have thought a great deal about what it is that takes priority in my own life. There certainly are a lot of things – and people who are up there at the top of my list. The people I love - My family, my work, my congregation, ... the things I like to have in my home, things I enjoy doing.

I think it's good to do a reality check sometimes to see where my heart is. Jesus said where your heart is, there also is your treasure. So, what is my greatest treasure? Is it the people I love? Or things? Or myself? My work? My money?

We also started this month remembering the saints who have gone before us – those who completed their lives on earth – finished the baptismal vows they took. I've thought a lot about different people I've talked to at the end of their life here on earth – some who were members here and some who were from former congregations where I've served.

When I was in Parsons, Kansas, I taught a weekly bible study at the Presbyterian Manor and heard some profound statements of faith there – and such deep interest in learning everything they could about heaven – about eternal life. They were so close. They loved to hear from John, especially John 14 where Jesus tells his disciples he is going to prepare a place for them and will come back and take them (and us) to be with him. In my Father's house are many mansions. They loved the translation that uses mansions, instead of the newer translations that say rooms, or dwelling places. One person said, "for me, mansions gives me a sense of there being plenty of room for us all. Room for me!"

I thought of one of my oldest parishioners, in that congregation – Pete. He loved to come by the church to talk. And he loved to talk about his faith. He told me many stories about his life, about his love – his wife who had passed before I ever became his pastor. He had served in the war and he talked about being afraid sometimes, yet how he would then remember who was with him. Pete knew he had a Savior who loved him and who promised to be with him. He talked openly about his strong belief in salvation and eternal life and that he would be with the Lord in that place when his time came to leave his life on earth.

As time went on, Pete's health deteriorated and he was put on hospice. And even there when I would visit he told me about looking forward to seeing Jesus. And to being reunited with his beloved wife.

My own faith is strengthened every time an older parishioner shares his or her faith with me. It is so encouraging to hear about their growth in the faith and how their priorities became changed over the years – until their love for Christ was the greatest love of all.

On this last Sunday of the Christian Year, which is known on the Church calendar as Christ the King Sunday, it is good to reflect again on the question that is very important for believers: Who is the king – the ruler - of your life?

In a way, that question sounds, at first, to be kind of irrelevant, doesn't it? We Americans have never lived under the rule of a Queen or King, never lived in a kingdom ... unless we lived in another country at some time.

As a little girl, I fantasized about living in a castle, being a princess, or a Queen, or marrying a Prince or a King. I'm not sure that little girls do that so much anymore, do they?

Although the monarchy system is different than what we know in our country, from what I read and see on the news, politically, it is not really any more romantic or glamorous than our own political system, which we all know has its faults. Although, there is a lot of fascination with Harry and Meghan, with William and Kate, as there was with Princess Diana.

So, while we don't live with the royals ruling our lives, when we think about it, all of us do have something or someone, who rules our lives. Think about your life. What is it that is most important to you? What is it that has your heart, your time, your thoughts? Whatever it is, we could say *that* is what is ruler of your life.

Some people are so completely consumed with the need to make money and to be wealthy that money easily can become the ruler.

Some of us may not make lots of money, but still, work rules our lives, consumes our days, our time and energy. Not that work is a bad thing. But if it is the most important thing, then work rules.

There are others who are under the power of addiction. Alcohol and drugs have them bowing down and controlling everything they do and every thought they think. It keeps them needing more, keeps them in debt, behind in bills, sometimes homeless, hungry, losing families and friends and jobs, not to mention self-respect.

Even the power of relationships can be so strong that they become the ruler, the king of our lives. People bow down and allow others to walk all over them, direct them, control them out of this great need to please.

Our Scripture reading in Luke today reminds us again of the mocking that the soldiers and others did toward Jesus. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself"

They put a crown on his head and an inscription above him on the cross where they nailed him. The crown was made of thorns that dug into his head and made the blood flow onto his face. The sign said, "This is the King of the Jews."

It was not a very fitting, respectful way to treat a king, was it? In fact, it was a hideous, horrible thing they did. They treated Jesus as the worst criminal ... they put him in the middle, between two real criminals.

How sad that the people did not understand. Many who had followed him at first, had hoped this truly was the Messiah, the one they had waited for. But they expected him to be like other kings ... to form an army, to be a warrior, to ride in with sword and shield and to conquer the Romans and establish his kingdom once and for all.

They simply did not understand that the Messiah would be different. They could not perceive that the One sent from God would be ... so meek, so weak, so willing to be put to death. What a disappointment he was to some.

But, Jesus, who truly was the Son of God, refused any drink that would help ease the pain, did not fight, did not struggle, but prayed "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

Even one of the criminals, hanging there on a cross beside him, even *he* had the gall to mock Jesus! "Are you not the Messiah? Come on! Let's see you save yourself ... and save us too, while you're at it." He was hard hearted to the very end.

The other criminal, on the other hand, seemed to understand what many others there that day, could not see ... that truly, this was the one sent by God. He knew Jesus had done nothing to deserve this unjust sentence. And in his new-found faith, even in his last hours of life, he said sincerely, what others could only joke about ... "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

Maybe the others could not see it. Maybe they did not hear it. But right there were two men, hanging on crosses, about to die ... one was the Savior, one was being saved. "Today," Jesus told him, "you will be with me in Paradise."

William Barclay says that the word "paradise" is a Persian word meaning "a walled garden." He says "When a Persian king wished to do one of his subjects a very special honor, he made him a companion of the garden, and he was chosen to walk in the garden with the king.

It was more than immortality that Jesus promised the penitent thief. He promised him the honored place of a companion of the garden, in the courts of heaven."

Little did they know that this was truly the King they would want to be loyal to. Little did they know that the world was going to be shaken and changed ... that truly a new Kingdom was in the works as Jesus hung there on that cross. How could they know that the one who appeared helpless, would prove to be the most powerful of all kings!

Of all the things or people that can rule our lives, when it comes down it, this is the only King that will matter in the end. Like the criminal on the cross ... we come to see that all the worldly things don't really matter.

Whatever he had done, whatever he had struggled with, and fought and stolen, or killed for, in the end, there was nothing left but him and Jesus ... the only one who could give him the strength and courage to make it through that ordeal and to find life on the other side.

Fred and I have loved reading Jan Karon's "Mitford" books. They are stories of Father Timothy Kavanah, an Episcopal priest, and his wife and parish, in the mountains in North Carolina (the mountains that we both love so much).

One of the favorite sayings of Father Tim and some of his friends, is to say: "remember ... Philippians 4:13, for Pete's sake!"

As I was studying this week, I was reminded of that quote, and of my friend, Pete, passed on from his earthly life to his heavenly, eternal life with deep faith. "Philippians 4:13 ... I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" ... for Pete's sake.

It *was* for Pete's sake. And it was for my sake, and for your sake, too. Christ Jesus, truly the Son of God, has given his very best, given all he is ... for all our sakes. He deserves the place in our hearts and in our lives that is first *and* last. He deserves to be the one who is the King – the Ruler – of our lives, who has our complete loyalty.

Like so many faithful others, Pete shared with me his belief that he belongs to God, he belongs in that Kingdom that is forever and ever. He believed that what Jesus accomplished in his death and resurrection was for his sake. And because of that, he could go through the last hours here, unafraid and with peace.

"I can do all things ... I can face persecution, I can walk through grief, I can go through dreadful illness, I can walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... I may experience fear ... but it will not consume me ... because Jesus strengthens me." He is my God. He is my Savior. He is my King.

Who is the Ruler of your life? Think about it. He was there when you born, when you were baptized, when you fell in love, when you grew old, ... he was there with my friend Pete and will be there with all of us when our life journey takes us from this life into the one Jesus promises ... Paradise ... that garden that is a place of *honor* in the Kingdom, where we will walk as a companion to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

And now, as John writes in Revelations:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds;
 every eye will see him,
 even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
So it is to be. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

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