

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“A Forgiving King”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Christ the King—November 24, 2019

Lessons: Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Some of you may remember the scene from the movie version of the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy has arrived in Munchkin Land and Glinda the Good Witch of the North arrives and asks Dorothy: “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” Not surprisingly, Dorothy is confused. In her experience, witches are old and ugly and when she says so the munchkins all giggle because, of course, Glinda is a witch and she is neither old nor ugly. Dorothy’s problem is that she’s never heard of a beautiful witch before. Glinda redefines for Dorothy what it means to be a witch.

Today is called Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the final Sunday in the liturgical year, when we celebrate the reign or sovereignty of Christ. While others may try to claim our allegiance, Jesus is our ultimate authority. This observance started in 1925, when Pope Pius XI, in response to increasing nationalism and secularism, and recognizing how easy it is for us to give our allegiance to that which is not God, proclaimed the centrality of Jesus Christ. We protestants joined in this tradition in more recent days.

Some people have trouble with the language of this day. Most of us have not grown up under a monarchy. We’ve not experienced kings firsthand, although I did get to see the Prince of Wales once when I lived in Scotland. We are not really acquainted with kings. What we know of kings is that they are strong and sometimes ruthless. The Game of Thrones series on TV was incredibly violent as various rulers attempted to gain and keep power. More often than not, that has been our understanding of what it is to be king. Jesus, of course, like Glinda the good witch, redefines our understanding of what it means to be a king.

This king is not old and ugly. This king is not ruthless in his attempts to gain and hold on to power. This king goes to the cross. Yet for those who were there, most of them did not understand. There was a sign above him that proclaimed “This is the King of the Jews.” The soldiers mocked him, saying “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” They all were working under the traditional understanding of being a king. A real king can surely save himself, but Jesus redefines what it means to be a king. He shows us that power can only be understood in the light of the cross. Instead of calling on armies of angels to come to his aid, Jesus refuses to respond to violence with violence. Pope Francis proclaimed several years ago: “The kingdoms of this world at times are sustained by arrogance, rivalries and oppression; the reign of Christ is a ‘kingdom of justice, love and peace.’ For a Christian, speaking of power and strength means referring to the power of the Cross, and the strength of Jesus’ love: a love which remains steadfast and complete, even when faced with rejection, and it is shown as the fulfillment of a life expended in the total surrender of oneself for the benefit of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> What kind of ruler are you?

Instead of using brute force to respond to the violence of the cross, Jesus responds with love and understanding. When surrounded by a mob, he responds with forgiveness. This king is a forgiving

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<sup>1</sup> Angelus Address of Pope Francis, Solemnity of Christ the King, November 22, 2015, on website of United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/christ-the-king-bulletin-insert.cfm>

king. It is extraordinary and it is a lesson we all have yet to learn. Forgiveness is not easy. Every Sunday and for some of us nearly every day, we pray about forgiving our debts as we forgive our debtors. Maybe we pray that prayer so often because we need constant reminding. Forgiveness is difficult and yet it is central. Janet Ramsey tells the story of attending a peacemaking conference in Jerusalem when a peacemaker named Rabbi Kelman told Ramsey's group of theologians, "You Christians have a treasure you must share with the world. Forgiveness is the heart of your theology."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, if we talk about forgiveness, it is important to remember what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness does not say that what was done does not matter. It does matter. Forgiveness does not pretend that any one of us can somehow forget the wrongs that have been done to us and our society. Forgiveness does not mean that criminals will simply remain on the streets continuing to tear down our communities. Forgiveness does not mean that battered and abused people need to return to their abusing partners. That is not true forgiveness. However, I wonder if our own forgiveness of those who have done wrong might in fact offer the spark of love in their own broken lives that could bring real change. Nancy Lynne Westfield suggests that "part of our inability to believe and trust the forgiving power of God's grace and mercy is our inability to believe that other people deserve mercy. *We* want to judge whom God lets into heaven...We would prefer it if paradise were exclusively for the nice people, the clean people, the polite people, the well-behaved people, the right people.

"As Christians, we have a confessional faith, not because we are weak, but because God is strong and God is love. We have a confessional faith because the grace of God is sufficient for all. There is grace for us *and* for the people we do not like...We confess because God's saving grace will heal, restore, redeem, and forgive those whom God has created and whom God loves fiercely. All have sinned and fallen short; all have angered, frustrated, and disappointed God. God so loved the entire world that whosoever, whosoever, whosoever believes shall get all the grace that God has to give. Thank God that God gives grace and that we do not."<sup>3</sup>

When we practice the hard work of forgiveness, we show the world who we really are. The church has rarely looked stronger than when our Christian sisters and brothers in Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania practiced this treasure of forgiveness in the aftermath of the shooting of their own little girls in school by a deranged neighbor. That incredibly difficult act by the Amish community encouraged a great many others to be more forgiving themselves. I suspect that the Amish would be the first to tell you that this act of forgiveness was not easy and that they are far from perfect, that they have more than enough sin in need of forgiveness themselves, and maybe because of that recognition, they were able to be forgiving themselves. They knew something about being forgiven themselves; hence they showed great love.

When we lived in Philadelphia, I met Jamie Humes who served as a speech writer for Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan. He wrote several books including one with short little inspiring stories. One came to light after the death of President Reagan. The president had made inquiries at St. Elizabeth Hospital, where John Hinckley was imprisoned, wanting to know if he could meet the man who tried to kill him. "Reagan predicated his request on the assurance that it would not disturb Hinckley or complicate his mental condition. Reagan was not encouraged by the prison psychiatrists to make such a visit.

"Reagan wanted to let Hinckley know he forgave him. Just days after Reagan was shot, he had told his pastor at George Washington Hospital, *The sooner in my heart I can truly forgive Hinckley, the sooner I will heal.*"<sup>4</sup> How might we learn from that example? What kind of leadership can we practice?

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Ramsey, Thoughtful Christian, Forgiveness. © 2007 [www.thethoughtfulchristian.com](http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com)

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Lynne Westfield, Pastoral Perspective, Luke 23:33-43, Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost. © 2010 Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>4</sup> James C. Humes

One more story about the power of forgiveness. I read this past week about Ruby Bridges, who was six years old in New Orleans in 1960. “Ruby was black; the other students were white. Her walk into . . . school, surrounded by federal marshals . . . signaled a major development in desegregation. Before her first day of first grade had ended, parents had emptied the school of white children in a massive boycott. Ruby learned alone that year, taught by the one teacher willing to remain.

“Huge crowds of protesters gathered daily outside the school to shout slurs and death threats at Ruby. Film clips from the day are hauntingly difficult to watch. Throngs of angry whites waved Confederate flags, and some even shoved before Ruby an open child’s casket with a black doll inside. These expressions of public hatred remind us how unrestrained fear can quickly spiral into mob mentality.”

Psychiatrist Robert Coles studied children in the desegregating South in the ’60s and he took a personal interest in Ruby. “One day Ruby’s teacher told Coles that she had noticed Ruby moving her lips as she was walking into school. So Coles asked her, “Who were you talking to, Ruby?” “I was talking to God and praying for the people in the street,” she said. “Why were you doing that, Ruby?” “Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don’t you think they need praying for?” Coles responded affirmatively but pushed further. “Where did you learn that?” “From my mommy and daddy and from the minister at church. I pray every morning [when I come to school] and every afternoon when I go home.” Coles continued, “But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.” “No,” she said, “I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to them. . . . I always pray the same thing. ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.’”<sup>5</sup>

Are you a good leader or a bad leader? We worship a king who practices the extraordinary treasure of forgiveness.

Let us pray: Jesus remember us when you come into your kingdom. Show us again and again what real strength and power look like and give us the courage to be more forgiving ourselves. In your name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter W. Marty, When Ruby Bridges prayed for her enemies. *The Christian Century*, March 29, 2017, Vol. 134, No. 7 © 2017.