

Christ the King Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

November 20, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:32-46

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The news story this week of the double murder in Warwick Twp., Lancaster County, claimed national attention, as the Amber alert went out, and the 18-year-old boy and his 14-year-old girlfriend finally were captured in the state of Indiana. The news story claimed **our** attention—this story of a secret teenage romance, parents who thought the age difference between the boy and their daughter much too great, and a Sunday morning confrontation leading to the parents' deaths.

In the wake of that tragedy, we might think any number of random thoughts and debate any number of hot-button issues. Issues like whether home-schooling your children will protect them from the world's dangers. Or whether gun control laws could have prevented David Ludwig from accessing a loaded weapon from his Dad's gun collection. Or whether putting limits on Internet and cell phone use, or at least knowing who their kids are chatting with, can arm parents with some appropriate oversight of their activities. Or whether 18-year-olds **should** be tried as adults. Oh, yes, there's much we can think and talk about.

But let me tell you what I'm thinking. I'm hoping someone will visit David Ludwig. I'm hoping there's a chaplain or local pastor or someone who will enter that prison to talk and pray with David. Because he most certainly needs that—just as the surviving members of the Borden family need someone who will talk and pray with them.

This thought of mine has nothing to do with the possibility that David Ludwig was simply troubled or misunderstood or mentally unstable, or whether it was a crime of passion or premeditation. Those are issues for the courts to decide. This thought of mine—that I hope someone visits him—is based solely on our Gospel lesson today, solely on the words of our Lord and King: *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me."*

You know, oftentimes we pastors, knowing weeks ahead what the appointed lessons are, hold onto a story or illustration that we plan to use in our sermons. Several weeks back I knew I'd want to talk to you about a person in prison. I just had someone else in mind. And it's someone, frankly, who elicits absolutely no sympathy. I'm referring to Dennis Rader, the self-proclaimed BTK serial killer. Rader was arrested last February in Wichita, Kansas, and charged with 10 murders committed over two decades. He admitted to those grisly murders, and by his own account, he received pleasure in the torture and killing of his victims. As shocking as that was, it was the fact that he'd been an active member of Christ Lutheran Church in Wichita, even serving as its council president, that truly pulled the rug out from under people, particularly the pastor and the congregation.

But maybe what was most shocking was that Pastor Michael Clark visited Rader at least weekly, from February through his final sentencing in August. I'm quite certain Pastor Clark is still visiting Rader. When asked about his continued visits to Rader, Pastor Clark simply said, "I just tell people, would you want me to stop coming to see you if I were **your** pastor?"

Pastor Clark doesn't visit Rader because he thinks he's innocent, although the pastor initially hoped last February that Rader and the BTK serial killer were not one and the same. No, Pastor Clark knows Rader is guilty of horrible crimes. But he visits him. And he also cares for the rest of Rader's family, and for the entire church family of Christ Lutheran. How difficult and challenging it must be, the sheer contrast of ministering to a murderer and to those victimized by him—for that's surely how the congregation and his family felt. I admire Pastor Clark and give thanks to God for him.

Does Pastor Clark think those prison visits will earn him a spot in heaven? I don't believe that's even a concern on Pastor Clark's mind. I believe he visits Rader because that is what one does when one follows Jesus, when one lives under the Lordship and rule of Jesus Christ.

In the parable this morning from Matthew's Gospel, the scene is of the Last Judgment at the end of time, and the king, or shall we say **our** Lord and King, Jesus Christ, is explaining to people on his right and on his left why they have been grouped into their particular groups, and why one group and not the other is welcomed into God's kingdom. The people welcomed into God's kingdom are surprised, utterly astonished. Those who have done good, compassionate, generous deeds are surprised, **first**, that their Lord took note of their deeds and **second**, that their Lord was present and somehow **identified** himself with the least in society. *"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"*

These weren't behaviors calculated and crafted for the effect, with hopes that the *paparazzi* would be out in force for a great photo-op, the event written up in the Patriot-News. These acts weren't done so that God would reward them, or even notice them. They simply **did** those behaviors—deeds of caring and love, hospitality and mercy for the least of those around them. Some of those deeds were probably as natural to them as one takes a breath. Yet even if the deeds were difficult and challenging (like visiting Rader?), they were deeds done because that is what one does when Jesus Christ is one's Lord and King.

Then there are the **other** people in the story. The king leaves no doubt here that these people did **not** provide for the hungry or the helpless, did **not** care for those in prison or in poverty. Again, the king has **identified** himself with all those who are the least in our world:

"... for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

These other people in the parable are **just** as surprised and astonished as the first set of people. And they ask the very same thing as the people who did deeds of compassion: *“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?”*

But in this case, you see, they ask the question because their deeds of compassion—had they done any—would have been done for the effect. Calculated and crafted for maximum publicity and maximum reward. (So—didn’t see their Lord in the midst of a situation? Well, then, no need to **act** like their Lord in the midst of that situation!) And thus they are equally surprised when they find themselves outside the kingdom of God.

For love and mercy, hospitality and service—those qualities they have not shown—are the very vision and plan of God for his kingdom—both now and in the age to come.

Now, I grant you some of those deeds of compassion are easy to do—most of us are only too happy to donate food to a food bank, or visit a person in the hospital or give our used clothing to Goodwill. But the prisoner? Ministering to a criminal? Only by God holding him up in strength can Pastor Clark possibly go and visit and minister to Dennis Rader. But, I tell you, Pastor Clark is not the only Christian walking that difficult and challenging path of caring for the least of these. There are people within our own congregation who have been involved in prison ministry for years. Talk with David Spears, and he and others can tell you their experiences. They have cared for the incarcerated through worship, Bible study, prayer and visitation. Our own seminary intern, Vicar Meeks, spends one afternoon **every** week visiting inmates at Dauphin County Prison, and she joined me and other Trinity members in a worship service there two weeks ago. In fact, Vicar Meeks is working on an internship project which will educate more folks here about prison ministry. She’ll lead some special classes in February and March during our Sunday School hour. As well, she will have us explore the mentoring program at Dauphin County Prison—a program designed to link the newly-released with people in the community who can help them prepare for the challenges of life beyond prison. These deeds of compassion from our members and from Vicar Meeks are not calculated for the effect, but are an expression of who they are as Christians, and their acceptance of living under the rule of Jesus Christ, our Lord and King.

For if Jesus Christ **is** our Lord and King, and this Lord and King has identified himself with the least of our brothers and sisters in the world, then we who follow Jesus Christ and accept our king’s rule are **also** to be identified with the least of our brothers and sisters. To quote social activist Eugene Debs, *“While there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”*

And in living out that identification with the least of these our brothers and sisters through acts of love and mercy—surprise! We inherit the kingdom of God because while we’re doing those acts we’re **living** the kingdom of God.

In the days and weeks to come, may someone live out the kingdom for David Ludwig.
AMEN.

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