

"Christ the King – Dominator or Partner"

Christ the King Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

8:30 a.m. Sunday, November 21, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

(To our readers: Images of Rep. John Boehner and Rep. Nancy Pelosi are being projected on the screen in Fellowship Hall as this sermon begins.)

And you thought the elections were over, the campaigning finished, and that it was safe to watch television again. Well, you are safe from having to endure political advertising for a while, but I am projecting the images of newly elected House Speaker John Boehner and newly elected Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi just to remind us about the way we humans handle power and authority.

Frankly, it doesn't matter which of our two major political parties is in power at the moment. Be it a Republican Speaker of the House and a Republican majority in congress, or be it a Democratic Speaker and a Democratic majority, the posturing to get to that point remains tragically the same. The end result, regardless of differing ideologies, remains the same.

First, they have to deride and blame the opposition so that they can win the election. And once elected, once they assume a position of power, they intend to make full use of it to press their advantage. The campaigning sounds like this: "It's our turn now! When we win the election, just you wait! Things will change around here. When we've got the votes in congress to push forward our agenda, just you wait! Things won't be the same."

Ironically, things will be the same. Pelosi? Boehner? Democrat? Republican? Ahh, fill in the blank. There will always be winners and losers. People with power, and people without. Some American citizens will thrive, and others will not. Some bills will pass; others will get mired in the minutiae of countless added amendments that have little to do with the original intent of the bill. Many of us will simply shake our heads and wonder just what it is they are doing in those hallowed halls. And we will wait until the next election cycle—which is just around the bend—when the negative campaigning and power-grabbing will occur all over again.

That's just the way the world works. People with power and people without. That's how wars are won, and how sports teams reign victorious. I admit I have my favorite football team, and I want it to win. (I won't name it, because we have a variety of teams supported by people in this congregation, and I wish to remain on good terms with you all...) However, my favorite team can only win if it exerts greater power over your favorite team. Because when you have power, you can get what you want.

And this is where human sin rears its ugly head. When we have power, it easily becomes corrupt. We don't just **press** our advantage; we **take** advantage. We get what we want, but at another's expense. We demand and receive, and someone else experiences loss. We abuse our power and authority because we can. Throughout history we have done this as individuals, groups, and entire nations. Throughout history people have ravaged God's good creation to plumb its resources, they have oppressed and persecuted minorities, they have become ridiculously wealthy on the backs of the poor. That's the problem with power in our sinful human hands.

There is a theory developed by social scientist Riane Eisler that we have but two ways of ordering society—the dominator system and the partnership system. And the dominator system, well, has “dominated” our history for centuries. It has become the way we organize life. However, Eisler believes in and advocates for its opposite—the partnership system.

Scott Gustafson, a former seminary professor of mine, studied Eisler's works and wrote a whole book (entitled *Biblical Amnesia*) about the dominator system and the partnership system. His contention is that God favors partnership ways. And after studying today's Gospel reading, I think Gustafson is right. God's kingdom is based on partnership ways. His mighty acts in history, especially in the person of his Son Jesus, were designed to dismantle the dominator system, and usher in a new way for human life to be organized, for human life to be lived. God desires a creation where status and rank, winning and losing, aren't the thing, but where mutuality, compassion, humility, and servanthood **are**.

It seems to me that what we hear in today's Gospel lesson, and what we are asked to contemplate on this Christ the King Sunday, is the inherent conflict between a dominator way of life and a partnership way of life. Jesus is caught in the crosshairs of this conflict, yet is ultimately the One who takes on the dominator system and introduces in his own life and death the partnership way.

In Luke's account of Jesus' agony on the cross, he makes clear that Jesus is humiliated by those who seem to have more power than he. The leaders and the soldiers scoff at him, call him names, and mock him by suggesting he is weak and powerless. They yell out to no one in particular: *He saved others; let him save himself is he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!* They shout at Jesus: *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!* Ironically, the names they call him are not as pejorative as they are accurate. They call him king. They call him Messiah of God. And they when call him those names, they call him rightly, for those titles are true, except they don't know that. The leaders and the soldiers are in dominator positions, able to push Jesus around in trial, torture and execution. Now, Jesus—he is no dominator. He will not push back.

Instead, the One they mock as king and Messiah acts in a righteous kingly way, in a way only the Messiah, anointed by God, **would** act. He prays to God the Father. Except it is not “Father, make sure they get theirs, and more, on your Day of Judgment!” It is not “Boy, get me down from this cross and let me at 'em!” It is

not "I want to be the dominator here!" No. Jesus says this: *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.* Any authority and any power Jesus does have, any "connection" to God the Father, is not an opportunity for Jesus to win and his tormentors to lose. It is an opportunity for everyone to gain life in God's kingdom.

And the criminal hanging beside Jesus who only asks to be remembered by him...well, Jesus doesn't look down his nose at him (after all, this was a **real** sinner on the next cross, as opposed to Jesus who was innocent!) And Jesus doesn't just toss a mere crumb of mercy at him—"Sure, sure, I'll remember you in my kingdom. What's your name again?" No. Jesus brings that criminal into full life-giving partnership with him: *Today you will be with me in Paradise.*

I don't exactly know how we human beings are supposed to work out this partnership way in war or football. And when House Speaker John Boehner is quoted as saying that the new majority "will be humbler, wiser and more focused," I think to myself, "I'll believe it when I see it." Human society is fully immersed in the dominator mode of being. But every once in a while, you and I are given a glimpse of this new way of being, of living. We get a glimpse today as we hear Jesus' words. And not just a glimpse, but a call to follow. Like the criminal on the cross who is brought into full life-giving partnership with Jesus, in the waters of our baptism you and I have been brought into the same.

And if we are indeed partners with Jesus, our Lord and King, we have opportunity to make this partnership way real and visible in the world around us. It begins with our compassion, our service, our love and mercy. It begins with our refusal to fawn over status, or seek power, or take advantage of others, and if we do, to ask forgiveness from God, and the strength of his Holy Spirit to try again. It begins with our listening when the King speaks. Let him reign in our lives, so we might truly live. **AMEN.**