Christ the King November 20, 2016

All Saints’ Church Year C

Jeremiah 23:1-6 Colossians 1:11-20

Psalm 46 Luke 23:33-43

This Sunday marks the end of the “church year,” the Last Sunday of Pentecost, and on this Sunday we celebrate Christ the King, every year.

Lest we forget, our gospel lesson reminds us that ***our*** king is a slave executed as a criminal, scoffed by leaders, mocked by soldiers and even derided by a condemned prisoner.

So much for power!

As our Savior, hanging from a cross, lay dying from a torturous death, on an instrument of death that the clever world designed,

a criminal, who is really us, looks into Jesus’ eyes and sees something of Christ’s glory,

and out of the depths of his soul asks for forgiveness.

Jesus, with no interrogation, no reluctance, no hesitation, no doubt, shows grace and mercy by inviting him, by inviting us, right now, to be with him in Paradise.

Bam, it happens that fast.

We are the criminal because when we show up, we show up, not out of virtue, but always in need…..always.

When Jesus shows up, he shows up as self-giving love.

He accepted the full weakness of human frailty…

by putting on the mantle of our human nature………. in order to be near us,

as a way to get as close to us as he can get. If possible, to get inside us, as a way to transform us to be a people who accept that God is madly in love with us, no matter what. That we are worthy, always, even though…. (you can fill in the blanks)… the “even thoughs” are erased.

And that this Love, accepted and realized, will move mountains and will give us the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

Our spiritual sages refer to a “thin place” as a place where the boundary between the finite world and paradise is very thin….. a place where we experience the glory of God, like when we see a beautiful sunrise or walk into an enormous cathedral or feel the expanse of the night sky.

That makes sense. Yet, I also think that there are “thin places” that have nothing to do about the physical place, and everything to do about the connection between people, being near someone, like Jesus is near to us, feeling the glory of love…….. like when you keep a vigil as a loved one lies dying, or when you witness a life being saved, or when a battered child reaches out to grab your hand, or when a dying man asks for forgiveness.

I had an experience of this kind of “thin place” last Friday in the pulpit, of all places, during our Veteran’s Day Service. In my homily, I began to tell my father’s story as a veteran, and maybe because the church was filled with veterans and their families, or that people were leaning forward in their seats, or that I was exhausted, overwhelmed by post-election sorrow, (probably all of the above), I began to cry. Tears came; there was no holding them back. And in that pulpit, so vulnerable, I felt loved, held, honored, and indeed experienced the veil between the ordinary and the extraordinary as very thin.

Paradise: In that vulnerable moment, I felt the beauty of my father’s brokenness rather than feel the shame of his failures.

My father’s father died when my father was 4- of pneumonia he caught walking the streets, unemployed, looking for work in the middle of winter, during the depression.

My father’s step-father died when my father was 16. His mother married soon after to an army man and he was deployed to Korea, before the war, taking his new wife…. leaving my father with no home and no parents. Rather than finish high school, he got in his pickup truck and drove west. Yes, drive west, young man…. for opportunity.

At the age of 21 he enlisted in the army to avoid being drafted into the Korean War. He was placed in a MASH unit in the heart of battle, and witnessed death and destruction and the horrors and absurdities of war. It took me years to realize that he probably suffered from PTSD all his life, self-medicating with alcohol.

He returned from the war, married my mother, from a working-class, union strong family, whom he courted with love letters from his post in Korea, hundreds of them which she kept bundled in her hope chest.

And then with a wife and four children in tow, he took great risks to pursue the American Dream- with an insurance company, a cattle ranch, apartment buildings, to name a few ventures that failed.

I grew up poor and privileged.

I know what it’s like to have bill collectors at the front door, eviction notices plastered on windows, to have no winter coat over many winters, holes in the soles of my shoes, to go to bed hungry, and to have Christmases ignored. And there was too much shame to discuss any of it.

I also grew up in a home on a lake, a simple home, but in a beautiful setting. And I enjoyed watching my mother prepare dinner parties when business ventures looked possible. Words and phrases like investments, hard work, no time for idleness, you can do anything you set your mind to, you pay your own way, and you are going to college …. were spoken in my home. Thank God. I wouldn’t be here without that kind of encouragement.

Finally, when my father was in his mid 50’s, he made a success of owning and running his own bar/restaurant: Gerties’ Grill, a small hamburger joint, was perfectly positioned between Fort Lewis and McCord Air Force Base in the depressed town of Tillicum, WA. Gerties’ Grill, also referred to as Galloping Gerties, became the enlisted men and women’s Club House. And as owner and bartender, my father became both chaplain and counselor and social worker to the many, many young service men and women away from their homes who poured out their grief and fear and joys to him. Though finally financially secure, he died a broken man. His dreams never realized.

I’ve been thinking about my father a lot lately, not only because of Veterans Day, but because I know, if he were still alive, he would have voted for Donald Trump, without a doubt. My father was not a bigot, nor was he stupid; not a reader, not educated, but he was smart and intuitive, and a wicked hard worker, and he defended the “little guy” …. He was not “deplorable.”

We would never have discussed it- he would know that I would be a Clinton supporter and I would know he would be a Trump supporter; a dance I still tango with all my siblings.

My father knew hopelessness, sad, sad stories, despair, deep disappointment, disastrous escapes into the military to find a way out, failure, blame, and fear, his children hungry. And even though he found his way to some prosperity, and his children products of the American Dream, he never felt worthy of God’s love; there was no convincing otherwise. And he would have felt camaraderie with the down and out, with those who know that whenever any kind of Titanic sinks, it is the wealthy who are saved. And a vote for Trump would have been a vote to break the system that keeps the downtrodden, down… why not throw a final brick through the wall that is protecting the elites in Washington, keeping them safe and secure as they preside over a broken and unfair system. There would have been no way to reason him out of this position.

My tears in the pulpit last week were a gift. I am asking an old question of faith in a new way: How can I live my life believing in the kind of King Jesus is?

In other words, my father is the crucified, (and many others) and I am the one, staring into his dying, seeing his glory, and asking for his forgiveness. And I am overwhelmed by his words: today you will be with me in Paradise.

Jesus is our king, our guide because he shows up as The Salve for our wounds, as our salvation in a way that we can hardly imagine will work.

Jesus does not save from dying, but through dying He saves us from the state of death, so that we too can believe that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon ***us***, because he has anointed ***us*** to bring good news to the poor. He has sent ***us*** to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

In the fullness of time, God is working out God’s purposes through ***all of us***, each and every one of us. In this November week of Thanksgiving, we give thanks.

Amen

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton