

## What Kind of King?

By Rev. Katie Suddeth

On August 8, 2021, I was ordained at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC. After being put off for a year due to COVID and moving to Colorado, it was a grand moment for me. Dan came to be a part of the service. My father was going to read my favorite scripture. My entire friends and family would be present for this life changing moment- it seemed that everything I had worked so hard for for all these years was finally coming to flourish.

And yet, all I can remember are the words of a perceived stranger. I first saw him as I was running around before service, but I didn't recognize him. He was sitting in the small group of 40 people that had all been invited to come on this special day. He was wearing a white tank top and denim shorts that sagged a little in the back. He also had an ankle monitor on, but that I wouldn't know about until someone mentioned it later. Everyone else was in their Sunday best.

Everyone noticed him yet no one recognized him. He didn't talk to many people. I asked all my friends from my different circles of life for weeks to see if anyone could identify this man and no one could. But on that day, when it got to the laying of the hands part of the service, where anyone who feels called gets up and says a prayer over you and for your ministry, I saw him get in line and went oh crap, what is about to happen, who in the world is this man, and should i be scared...

Why is it that most of us would be much more comfortable not knowing what happened to the thief who mocked Jesus than knowing that the other undeserving thief was let into paradise?

We love to talk about how Jesus accepts everyone, but at the end of the day in our hearts we want paradise to only be for the clean people... the people we like... the well-behaved people...

Because surely Jesus didn't mean it when he told the thief that today he would be in paradise.

Jesus is a king whose majesty can only be seen when you look down, not up. His rule is not about prestige for self or conquering lands- his rule is about others. He does not help himself, he helps others who need help. The ones that society says are not worthy of anyone's help or time. The rejects, the misfits, the ones suffering from addiction, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the physically ill. He challenged the unjust treatment of women, preached the need for patience with children, and accused the faith leaders of the time of lacking good faith.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like love freely given when a foolish son asks for his inheritance, takes it, goes to a foreign land, and squanders all he has. Then, when the son comes to his senses and returns, hoping his father will forgive him, he is met with celebration and rejoicing because of his father's great love and ability to forgive him.

Jesus said that the kingdom of god is like a shepherd, who cares so deeply for his sheep that when one is lost, the shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep and does not give up until the sheep is found.

Jesus said the kingdom of god is like a rich man who gives a party and when the other rich people are too busy to come, he invites the poor, the blind, and the lame.

The kingdom of god is not a tangible empire with land conquests and money power. This kingdom is hidden behind the noise of the still ruling empires of our time- in fact, this kingdom is not only beyond our world, but overcomes our worldly empires.

The Kingdom of God is a kingdom ruled by love and forgiveness. This is a kingdom based on grace. Not on our grace, but God's grace. This is a kingdom in which you can only see the majesty of its king when you look down, not up.

In Jesus' last moments, he demonstrates his majesty. He first asks for God to forgive those who act out of ignorance. "Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they do."

There is a Buddhist practice called Metta prayer. I was introduced to this practice from a classmate during Divinity school, as he is a practicing buddhist.

This practice is solely based on getting the person praying to move from thinking about the selves to thinking about others. It is based on loving kindness, a term we also find in the Psalms and throughout the Bible. There are many versions of this prayer, but the one that John shared with me has two lines that have stuck with me:

If I have hurt anyone, knowingly or unknowingly in thought, word or deed, I ask for their forgiveness.

If anyone has hurt me, knowingly or unknowingly in thought, word or deed, I extend my forgiveness.

These lines have stuck with me all these years, because sometimes the most harmful things we do to each other is out of ignorance. The things we say or do to each other without thinking about the impact- because impact means more than intention. The things we intentionally or unintentionally say to each other that cut deep within the soul... Maybe even the things we should say, but don't.

Here is Jesus, demonstrating loving kindness. He is being tortured and hung on a cross, asking for forgiveness for those who are causing him this pain. Jesus is asking for them to be forgiven because they do not fully understand what they are doing or saying. That is

love. That is the radical grace of God's kingdom. That we are forgiven for the things we knowingly or unknowingly do.

Right after Jesus says this, Luke describes more of the picture for us, there are three crosses. Jesus is in the middle while there are two convicted thieves on his left and right side. The first thief mocks Jesus- he says if you are really the son of god then save yourself and us. The second thief rebukes the first, declaring that Jesus is an innocent man. He then turns towards Jesus and asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

I hope we do not miss that the second thief is making a confession of faith. He is acknowledging that he believes Jesus is innocent and that he is King of the Jews. He is recognizing the goodness of Jesus. He is listening as Jesus is being tortured and he cries out, "Forgive them father, for they do not know what they do." He is witnessing the gospel.

So when he says remember me, he is not saying remember me and save me. He is actually saying please do not remember me according to my wickedness, but remember me according to your goodness.

Jesus responds by promising the second thief that today you will be with me in paradise. The word today is used a lot in Luke, but it is not used meaning a 24 hour interval, but it is used to describe the moment when God's salvation fractures time.

In his essay Nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson called this fracture of time, The transparent eyeball moment. This is a moment in which we are able to see beyond our physical limitations and into the kingdom of God. It is a moment when we realize who God is and who we are in relation to God. It is when we see the potential of what could be. It is when we catch a glimpse of salvation, we are transformed into new creations that dedicate themselves to following the path of love and liberation set out by Christ.

Jesus in this text is not saying when we die, you'll join me in my kingdom in the clouds. Jesus is offering salvation at this very moment. He is declaring that his kingdom is here now, and today, in this moment with your declaration of faith- you have felt God's grace and you are witnessing the kingdom of God.

What Kind of King spends his last moments on a cross, offering salvation to a convicted criminal? The same king who offers that salvation to you and me. Because none of us deserve God's grace and we certainly haven't earned it.

Remember the man at my Ordination? The man who no one could identify and how i was freaking out when he got in line for laying of the hands...

When it was his turn, he came up to join me kneeling at the altar, and he told me thank you. I stared at him wondering what in the world he was thanking me for, but then he told me i kept my promise, and then he said to me almost word for word a prayer that I prayed to God back in 2016 when I had decided to go to seminary and dedicate my life to

my call and ministry. A stranger almost verbatim said to me a prayer that I had never spoken to any other human in my life.

In that moment, that man, ankle monitor and white tank top, showed me the grace and compassion of the living god. I felt the power of salvation in that moment. For a moment, I was able to see beyond my worldly limitations, and see the kingdom of God.

I can't tell you what most people prayed over me that day. I cannot begin to tell you what the homily was about. What I can tell you is that I witnessed the gospel, the good news in flesh. That man, whoever he is, extended to me a moment of grace, and I almost missed it due to my own personal hang ups.

What Kind of King extends salvation to a convicted thief? The same one who humbles and extends salvation to a candidate for Ordination, who thinks she has it all figured out. A king who appears to us in the most uncomfortable ways. A king whose majesty can only be seen when we look down, not up. Amen.