

“Life in Two Kingdoms”
November 22, 2015
Rev. Eric S. Corbin
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-38a

Several years ago, Andrew Malcolm wrote about a woman named Cecille Bechard in his book called *The Canadians*. In the book, Malcolm says Cecille is “a Canadian who visits the United States several dozen times a day – when she goes to the refrigerator or to the backdoor or to make tea, for instance. To read and sleep, she stays in Canada. And she eats there too, if she sits at the North end of her kitchen table.” Mrs. Bechard’s home is in both the Canadian province of Quebec and the U.S. state of Maine at the same time. The house in which she lives was already there in 1842 when the boundary line was drawn. And so, she travels back and forth from the U.S. to Canada several times a day. She is a citizen of one country who spends much of her time in another country, all while staying in the same place. And maybe, we can see in her life a metaphor for Christians. We live here in the United States. We go about the daily tasks of life – eating and sleeping and working and playing. Our opinions, desires, and habits are shaped significantly by the culture in which we live. Much of our identity is wrapped up in our secular society. And yet, as Christians, we have a separate identity, a separate reality that can only be seen through the eyes of faith. We are citizens of a different realm. We live in two kingdoms.

Today marks the end of the year for Christians. In our secular lives, we look at the calendar and see that there is still more than a month left in this year, but as Christians, we look at the liturgical calendar and see that today is the end of the year. Next week begins a new Christian year, starting over with Advent – the season of anticipation – as we do each year, but today, at the end of the church year, is the day the Church has designated as “Christ the King Sunday.” Though we have many special days in the church that date back for centuries (like All Saint’s Day that we celebrated just a few weeks ago), this is a pretty new day in the life of the church. Christ the King Sunday was instituted in 1925 to combat rising nationalism and dangerous dictatorships in Europe. In a time when powerful rulers were demanding more and more allegiance, this day was set aside to affirm that *Christ* is King above all else. Our primary allegiance is to Jesus, our King, and not to our country or political leaders, and the call of Christ should win out over all else. We live in two kingdoms, but the kingdom of Jesus Christ is always greater. No matter who wins elections, no matter where we live, no matter what style of government is in effect, Jesus Christ is King over all. And so, especially today, we celebrate that Christ is King!

We celebrate today the kingdom of Christ, but that language of “kingdom” and “king” is something that really is a bit foreign to us. Just what kind of a King is Jesus? In the gospel lesson, Jesus is taken before Pontius Pilate. The religious leaders hoped to have Jesus executed for their own purposes and they told Pilate that Jesus was calling himself a king. They hoped this would get Pilate’s blood boiling that this Jesus would dare to elevate himself to the level of a king. It would be an act of treason against the Roman Empire to do so. Pilate looks for the evidence and he asks Jesus point-blank “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus doesn’t answer Pilate directly. He says, essentially, “Did you come up with that idea yourself, Pilate, or did someone else give you the idea?” Pilate says that he is not a Jew and that Jesus’ own people handed him over. And then we get to the point. Jesus says “My kingdom is not from this world.” Some translations have this as “My kingdom is not *of* this world.” I like *The Message* paraphrase best. It says “My kingdom doesn’t consist of what you see around you...

I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king." The Jews were citizens of the Roman Empire – that was the kingdom to which they belonged on one level. But on the more important level, they were citizens of the kingdom of God. They lived – *and we live* – in two kingdoms at once. Jesus' kingdom is not *from* this world, it is not *of* this world, but it is most certainly *in* this world. The kingdom of God is *here* and *now*, not just something to look forward to after we die. What is it that we pray, week after week? "Thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God *is* here and now. We hold dual citizenship. We live in the United States, but we are also citizens of the kingdom of God.

We are called to live each day in two worlds, two realities, two kingdoms. We are not called to retreat from the world which surrounds us – to ignore its pain and suffering, its hunger and disease, its wars and violence of all shapes and sizes. We are called by God to imitate Christ and to put ourselves into the midst of the world's need, not ignoring the cries of our brothers and sisters, but seeking to meet their needs. We are part of this earthly kingdom as active participants in making this world a better place for everyone, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, as Jesus tells us in Matthew 25. At the same time, we are also called to look past the daily to the eternal. We live in two worlds, and we are to look to Jesus to see how to live in both. We don't compartmentalize our two kingdoms, but instead strive to bring the way of living of *Christ's* kingdom into the *worldly* kingdom, following in the footsteps of our true King.

What kind of King is Jesus? Jesus is a servant king. He is a king who does not rule through power or greed. His is never a reign by force. He came from heaven to be one of us, and in doing so, showed us this very different way of kingship and modeled for us how we should live. His reign is one that always seeks to serve, rather than to be served. Pilate did not understand this type of king and all too often, we don't either. Yet, we are called to emulate Jesus. We are called to serve others as He did. We are not called to rule over others, but to work side-by-side with others. We are to be humble and empty ourselves in service to others. We are to live in full awareness that all that we have – including life itself – is a gift of God's grace, *and* we are to live in a way that shows that grace to others. And the world, like Pilate, very often will not understand. The world often will not be able to see our dual citizenship, seeing only one kingdom, the one immediately around them. The world often works on greed and selfishness and power and we are called to the opposite. We are called to testify to the truth, though others may not understand. When Jesus told Pilate that He came to testify to the truth, Pilate asked simply "What is truth?" We are not sure in what way Pilate meant the question, but it may be that he was saying that there is no absolute truth. This is a fallacy that we hear repeated today. There *is* an absolute truth and it is found in Jesus, it is found in scripture, and it is found in our God. We are called to testify to that truth, and to live lives of dual citizenship in the world that we can see around us and in the world that we can only see through the eyes of faith. In both, we are to follow in the reign of Christ. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Flannery O'Connor changed that up a bit to say "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." She's right. Knowing the truth will certainly make us odd. Knowing that we hold dual citizenship, while many of those around can only see one kingdom, will certainly make us odd. But we were never called to be *normal*. We were called to be *faithful*. And, we are called to be grateful. We are taught this in scripture, in passages such as Ephesians 5:20, "Giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" and 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Later this week is a great celebration. Many will travel – some for great distances – to gather with others to declare what matters most. Perhaps you think I'm talking about Thanksgiving Day, and I wish I were, but our culture seems much more focused on the great celebration called "Black Friday," a day on which people arrive in droves to

their favorite retail establishment to pick up “bargains.” As a pithy line often shared on Facebook says “Only in America do we wait in line and trample others for sale items one day after giving thanks for what we already have.” In recent years, the shopping has encroached onto Thanksgiving Day itself, the day on which we – in theory – gather to show gratitude for our blessings. All of us, no matter what “stuff” we own, have so much for which we should show gratitude, as we are called to give thanks in scripture, and this week is a perfect time for us to be reminded of our need to give thanks.

Giving thanks is something we often neglect to do. I know it is true for me, and I suspect for many of you as well. We fail to give thanks to God for our blessings. We sometimes focus on the gifts and forget about the source of the gifts. Our God is a generous giver and we always have plenty to give thanks for. Sometimes that may be hard to see. Sometimes we go through trials and have difficulty seeing the positives in our lives. In a few minutes, we'll be singing the hymn "Now Thank We All Our God." The words of that hymn were written by Martin Rinkart, who was a pastor in Eilenberg, Saxony in Germany during the Thirty Years' War. Eilenberg was a walled city and it became severely overcrowded by refugees from far and near. The city suffered from famine and disease and Eilenberg became a giant morgue. In 1637, all of the other ministers had died and Rinkart was left to perform all of the funerals. In that year, he performed nearly 4,500 funerals, including that of his own wife. Some days, he performed as many as 50 funerals. Through God's grace even in the midst of this suffering and warfare, Rinkart never lost courage or faith and it was during the war that he wrote "Now Thank We All Our God." "Now thank we all our God / With heart and hands and voices, / Who wondrous things hath done, / In whom His world rejoices; / Who, from our mother's arms, / Hath blessed us on our way / With countless gifts of love, / And still is ours today." Even in the midst of terrible circumstances, we still have the love of God. We still have blessings from God. We still have cause to rejoice. And we still have reason to give thanks to God.

We should give thanks to God for our blessings and we should give thanks to those around us for the gifts they bring, whether that gift is material or not. The gift of a smile or a hug can be the best gift you can receive on some days. The gift of prayer is a wonderful gift to give and to receive. The gift of fellowship here one with another is an invaluable gift. Each of us live lives that have been touched deeply by others and too often we do not express our gratitude. When we focus on the gift rather than the giver, our priorities are wrong. When we treat God like someone who owes us something rather than someone to whom we owe everything, we are heading in the wrong direction. When we neglect the divine source of grace which permeates every moment of our lives, we are not living the lives God is calling us to live. We are to live in recognition of the grace of God, so that we may share that grace with all we encounter. So, on this Sunday we call *Christ the King Sunday* and just before Thanksgiving Day, let us truly follow Christ's reign in our lives by living lives of humility, grace, and thanksgiving. May this world get a glimpse of Christ's kingdom as we work for Christ and Christ works through us. May we see, more and more, God's kingdom, here on earth. Amen.