

Reign of Christ

Sermon 11.26.17

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24.

Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. We're finishing out the year we've spent with Matthew, about to embark on a year following Mark. That's how it goes, you know – the lectionary calendar goes round on a three-year cycle, one year for each of the synoptic gospels. Year A, which we're closing out, follows Matthew, year B follows Mark, and year C follows Luke.

As it happens, we're about to begin my favorite year, the one that follows my favorite gospel, Mark. Also as it happens, we're about to end my least favorite year, Matthew. He's just so judgmental. Matthew: he's just so harsh. I usually find it hard to take.

Usually.

If you feel like you've heard this reading recently, rest assured, you have. We heard it last week because I misread my lectionary calendar. So, as I said about this reading last week, I'll say again, that I imagine Matthew's need for clear-cut cosmic justice came about from his own experience of the world as deeply unjust.

This gospel was likely written around the year 80 or 90. For those keeping count, this is about forty or fifty years after Jesus lived and died and lived again. This is about thirty or forty years after the first books of the New Testament were written – those by Paul, the first of which was probably his first letter to the Thessalonians. This is about ten or twenty years after the fall of the Temple, when Rome had finished its first war against the Jews, which they did by finishing off Jerusalem. (The second war against the Jews would come in the first decades of the second century.)

In sum, the writer of the gospel of Matthew, whose name may or may not have been Matthew, but whom I'll call Matthew, likely came of age at a time when justice was a distant notion, some pie-in-the sky thing; and when injustice was a full display. Those in charge were cruel, inhuman; and those not in charge were reliant on mercy that was never forthcoming. The powerful were evil, the godly were powerless, and

everywhere were ruins of what had once made life orderly and meaningful, beautiful, good.

And I'm not just talking about the imperial authorities, by the way. I'm talking about the religious authorities, too. It wasn't only that the imperial forces beyond the people Israel and Judah were rotten; it wasn't only that the imperial forces of Rome, which occupied the land of Israel and Judah, were terrible and terrorizing. It was also that the religious authorities were corrupt, merciless.

They were looking out for themselves. They'd forgotten what this whole thing was supposed to be about. This entire religious apparatus was to help the people keep the Law, which was largely about simply loving your neighbor, taking care of the poor and sick, and looking out for the orphan and widow.

It really wasn't supposed to be that complicated.

But now the religious authorities – they'd begun to justify themselves. As if they were concerned most of all with the fancy fringes on the end of their prayer shawls, and the high status seats in the synagogues and at Sabbath dinners, the religious authorities had hardly a moment for showing what righteous living actually looks like. These priests of the fallen Temple, and teachers and interpreters and enforcers of the Law – they were as oppressive and arbitrary as the worst of the Romans.

Well, maybe not *that* bad. But, really, the whole world (at least according to Matthew) had become as the Weird Sisters in Macbeth proclaim it to be: "Fair is foul and foul is fair..."

The Weird Sisters: I'd forgotten about them. I hadn't seen Macbeth in decades, hadn't read it in even longer. The Weird Sisters: do you remember them? Do you know about them? They got the whole tragedy going. Gathered like witches around a cauldron out somewhere on the windswept Scottish heath, they were weird for their not clearly being human and not clearly being supernatural. Did they foretell the future, or did they merely suggest it – a suggestion that Macbeth would then happily bring about? "Hail, King Macbeth," they said to him when he happened upon their strange ceremony.

But he *wasn't* king.

But he *would* be.

But by whose doing...? Fate, or ambition?

It's all fresh in my mind because I finally saw it again, ten days ago. At the Fall Festival, Shakespeare and Company's 29th annual, Lenox high school staged Macbeth.

For this reason, I knew a lot of the actors. The son of family friends, for example, played Macbeth – and convincingly, going from hapless to horrifying, and making me forget all the while that he was still just Evan. The *daughter* of family friends played Macduff, the one who would at last kill Macbeth. I don't know why they cast a girl in the role. She didn't play the character as a woman, and there were lots of boys in the play so it wasn't due to a shortage of boys willing to take it on. It might have been that she auditioned with the best sense of what the character should be in this given production.

In any event, I doubt very much it was to make a political statement. I mean, they worked on this production for months – since the start of the school year. They'd been working on it since long before this strange moment we're in far as gender dynamics are concerned, long before this reckoning began to rise and eventually overwhelm our whole society.

Really, I don't think Julie Monteleone was set up to embody all the fury that so much of womankind has been feeling in recent weeks. But that's not to say this isn't what she managed to do – at least for me. I'll admit it: watching a girl hunt, fight, and kill a king who had never been worthy of the role, who had never been *rightfully* in the role, I was overcome by it, and more than a bit undone. For a couple of days, I had a hard time holding myself together.

I know that Shakespeare's plays had a far more powerful effect on their original audiences than we English majors of the late 20th century might really understand. Certainly, Shakespeare was a genius. As regards language, as regards human nature and human governance, as regards natural law and psychological drives, Shakespeare was a genius. You could argue that he was equal to the Protestant Reformation and the invention of the printing press in bringing to a close the Middle Ages and ushering in the Modern Era – and he was just one man, one imagination.

But none of that gets to what being in the audience of one of his plays would first have been like.

Shakespeare's plays are bawdy, violent, uproarious affairs; and his audience was made up of people of every sort. They plays are full of juvenile humor, disgusting insults, ridiculous misunderstandings, human ugliness and heartbreak, and seditious undertones; and his audience would have been full of people who loved a fart joke as much as the next guy, and might even fart along.

Sedition: the crime of inciting rebellion against the monarch or the state. Sedition: the crime, incidentally, that Jesus was charged with and that got him crucified. ("Didn't you say you were King of the Jews?") What Shakespeare incited his audience to imagine in many of his plays is the sort of thing that could have gotten you hanged if you were just some guy on the street, just some nobody citizen of the realm. Really, it was a potentially deadly business to suggest that the king was a suggestible oaf and would eventually become a murderous monster. But here was a playwright doing just that, and a theater full of people going along.

Catharsis, it was. Catharsis, these offered the people who were otherwise quite pressed down. Originally a medical term, it means the purgation or purification of a diseased part. Aristotle, though, and others of the ancient Greeks, recast it as a more psychological phenomenon, and one particularly tied to the experience you might have in the theater, watching a tragedy or even producing a tragedy. Here the audience and players have purged from their system specifically pity and fear, but other attendant emotions too – rage, resentment, grief, an abiding suspicion that there's a lot of absurdity at work in this life, lots of stuff too painful or dangerous to carry around in your conscious mind from day to day.

Of course, this catharsis is tough to come by these days, at the theater at least. We regard it all too highly; it's too cultured an affair to allow in such naked human experience. And as far as Shakespeare's concerned, we revere him entirely too much to let him into our guts and bowels. Getting riled up at a staging of Macbeth would be like getting riled up in church. Inappropriate! There's a time and place for human need, desperation, desire, grief. And the theater, like the church, is hardly such a place.

Hmm.

Unless, apparently, Julie Monteleone is playing Macduff. Yes, unless little Julie Monteleone is playing Macduff, and Donald Trump is playing the U.S. president, and Harvey Weinstein is deciding who lives and who dies in young, female Hollywood, and the U.S. Senate features a spectrum of men who range, as regards their behavior toward girls and women, from unfunny to inappropriate to creepy to criminal. Then, and perhaps only then, is it possible that a respectable pastor, wife, and mother of two might wish more than anything that Julie Montelone would finally subdue and even slaughter Evan Silverstein, who is easily eight inches taller than she is and eighty pounds heavier, though not as quick on his feet or as good with a sword.

Sitting in the balcony as I was, just over the stage, it was all I could do not to jump down and lend Julie a hand. And I certainly had to watch my language as I but cheered her on. The boys were just beneath me, in the pit with all the kids from Lenox who didn't know that Shakespeare is supposed to be hoity-toity.

It was really their unruliness that made possible mine.

Funny, yes. But after that evening, really for a couple of days, I felt like the Housatonic River. Poisoned by PCBs that General Electric left behind to settle deep into its bed and banks, the river is perhaps best left un-dredged. Sure, we can't fish in it, but at least the toxins aren't active in the environment.

Sometimes it's just best to let the toxins of a corrupt world settle in.

Don't dredge it all up.

Jesus, perhaps, had dredged it all up. For Matthew, Jesus had perhaps dredged it all up – because he was really struggling. In his rendering of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Matthew (I think) was really struggling to keep the radical faith that the gospel demands – a faith that all will be redeemed, a faith that nothing is beyond God's power to save it, not even the Romans, not even the religious authorities.

And for the most part, he got it. For the most part, Matthew understood that what's good about the good news of Jesus Christ is more thoroughly good than anything the world had served up or would serve up or might even imagine for itself.

For the most part, Matthew understood that Jesus was a figure far grander and frankly more disturbing than just some warrior king who was going to make things good again for Israel and Judah, or even just some punitive judge who was going to know whom to punish and whom to reward. For the most part, Matthew seemed to understand that the kingdom of heaven, of which he so often spoke, was a puzzling realm in which the worldly ordering of things (good and bad, right and wrong) comes to nothing in face of God's grace, Christ's redeeming, and the Holy Spirit's boundlessness.

But these last few weeks we've been hearing more of Matthew's struggle. These last few weeks of the liturgical year, wherein we've heard from the last few chapters of this gospel narrative, which concern the last few days of Jesus' life in this world, the struggle to maintain a faithful equanimity has, I think, been right there below the surface. The parables that Matthew remembers Jesus to have told are harsh, and not only judgmental but also punitive. They voice the threat of eternal torment. They promise punishment for the people who are decided to deserve it.

And this is to say these parables, this narrative confession: they go against the world as I at least know it to be, and against people as I understand people to be. Whether Matthew had this perspective, which admittedly comes of privilege, I can't say. But I do; I have it. I *know* that seldom is the circumstance in which pure evil has come up of itself, and not of some grand tragedy or personal misfortune; and I know that few are the people who are wicked through and through. Finally, I know people who are confident in their judgments as to who's heading to hell; I don't aim to be among them. The world is simply more complicated than that. People are simply more complicated than that.

A particularly persistent meme still making its way around social media features a once-CIA officer who, speaking to the camera, explains the one lesson she learned in all the work she did in counter-terrorism all over the world: that everyone thinks they're the good guy. Everyone thinks they're Luke and Han, that scrappy duo righteously fighting a powerful, technologically-advanced, and most of all evil empire.

Everyone thinks they're Katniss and Peeta. No one relates to Darth Vader; no one identifies with President Snow.

And I imagine we know this. To be sure, from our lofty perch in beautiful Monterey, with its two-acre zoning and private roads, we have the privilege of understanding people as nuanced, as each and all a complicated tangle that defies clear-cut judgment and condemnation. We don't need such brittle thinking because we're largely protected from one another and from brutality of the sort that's immediate in countless other people's lives.

But what, then, are we to do?

What are we to do with this insight that's perhaps counter to human nature (that there's good and bad and our only hope is to get right the bad so the good will survive), and that's counter to many people's experience (that there really is a threat to my well-being and I've got to get rid of it because my well-being is what's rightly to be defended), and most pointedly that's counter to much of what we read in the Bible (that there is wickedness, and God will excise it and condemn it), when we know also that such thinking and such behaving leads so easily into a downward spiral of violence whose end is death, one death, many deaths, the death of a whole society, a whole culture, the death of all?

We, though, follow a *crucified* Lord, who took such violence unto himself, suffered it, died of it, and then rose from it back to life, back to loving, back to preaching peace, all as if to reveal such violence as no longer valid. We ally with a crucified king, who reveals how a true king serves his realm – in self-giving love, which is to say not the last one to die after all the foot soldiers are gone but the first to die, and therefore also the last for his having revealed the absurdity of war in the first place, for his having laid bare violence as itself deceptive and having stripped of any virtue all acts of vengeance that are now seen as simply satanic, of that adversarial spirit which justifies itself but only to its own end, like a virus that kills its host until it too must die (as much as a virus can be said to die). This king offers himself as the first sacrifice and becomes also then the last sacrifice by removing the aim of any further violence.

And this is why this king is *my* king.

And yet...

Matthew's struggle is our struggle. Matthew's struggle to understand Christ as one who comes out of their shared tradition but also who critiques that tradition is our struggle as well. It's a tough notion to wrap your head around that one event in the Bible might critique another event in the Bible. It's a tough notion to grasp that the Christ event, as it's sometimes called, might call into question other sworn testimony of the Bible. Especially if you're religiously devout, as Matthew was and as we might also be, it's difficult to embrace the thought that Christ might have made problematic other assertions made in good faith.

But that's what I do.

Every week in my preaching, every day in my living, I use the hermeneutic of the cross to test the veracity of other assertions about God, and attendant assertions about what's right and what's wrong, who's good and who's evil, what shall be punished and what rewarded – even assertions made in the Bible. If a theological idea doesn't comport with the cross of Christ, the cross of self-giving love, then it isn't true. If an assertion about God doesn't comport with the cross, this final revelation that brings to an end all strife, then it's false. I give primacy to the cross even over the Bible, which I see Matthew struggling to do as well.

It's just so difficult to believe that God's power to redeem and save is *that* powerful. And, of course, there's little catharsis in it. But it abounds with something far better than that: absolute goodness as triumphant, as the end.

This is the end to which each Sunday should point, and even evoke, but perhaps this is most of all the case on this last Sunday of the church year. This is the Sunday when we might gather as if at the end, all brought in, all given safe passage through the throes of history – its trials and tribulations, its triumphs and humiliations. This is the service when we might live out what's been promised and make real what's been revealed – Christ as King and we ourselves amidst a realm where exploitation and intimidation have no bearing and no place, where power is exercised in service of others and strife is seen as absurd more than seductive. I like to imagine Matthew

converted to the truth of the story that he was himself telling. Likewise, it's a story we'd be blessed to live with our lives, transformed in its truth as we go.

So, we'll begin going again next week, another year of adventure beginning with the first Sunday of Advent.

Meanwhile, we end as we began, in thanks and praise.

Thanks be to God.