

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20 – 24 “The Power to Abuse”

There's been a lot of talk lately about how power is wielded and how leadership is exercised. Where do we look for our role models? What's the *definition* of a role model anymore? Is there anyone who is even safe to follow as a role model these days? When we elect our governing leaders, do we overlook serious moral, personal or even criminal failures just because we side with them on certain policy issues? What about those who may be paragons of personal moral decency, but they support a policy that's offensive to us? It's frustrating sometimes isn't it?

I'm doing something that I only get to do every six years or so. Notice this year we weren't scrambling the day before Thanksgiving to decorate the church in time for the first Sunday in Advent? That's because the first Sunday of Advent doesn't happen three days after Thanksgiving like it usually does. That means we can actually take a little breather after Thanksgiving to observe something on the church calendar that even the biggest lectionary-nerds skip over. Today is “Christ the King” Sunday. Don't feel bad. I didn't know about it until a few years ago either. It's observed mostly by the Catholic Church, but others have picked up on it over the years. The challenge of “Christ the King Sunday” is to imagine what it would be like to have Jesus as our ruler. Then we can ask questions about our world using Jesus as our example. It's sort of like, “What Would Jesus Do” except it's not “Should I eat that last piece of fudge -- What would Jesus do?” It's more like, “If I were the leader of a nation and was trying to negotiate peace between two warring nations, what would Jesus do?”

Now some preachers and church folk skip over “Christ the King Sunday” because they object to referring to Christ as “king.” Why? Well, for one thing, how many good, shining examples of hereditary monarchies do you see in the world these days? So instead, some folks refer to this Sunday as, “Christ the Divine Ruler Sunday” or “The Reign of Christ Sunday,” which is fine I guess. I understand the reasoning. But I think we take things a little too far sometimes when we try to be

hyper-cautious about what we name or label things. Yes, words are important and how we use words matters. And yes, there aren't very many good examples of kings in the world right now, but I think to name and claim Jesus as King can be a good way to challenge the unjust rulers of the world who *want* to be called "King." To refer to Jesus as "King" or "Lord" in Biblical times was a pretty bold way of saying to the rulers of the world: "Because Jesus is our King that means *you* are *not*." Simply rejecting titles because of bad experiences or bad associations can be counter-productive. (Is Jesse going to go on a rant about politically correct language?! Not ... exactly. Just bear with me for a bit, okay?)

Here's another example of where we go a little overboard in the church. Sometimes we overreact when someone refers to God as "Father." Yes, I get that it's not very healthy to assign a gender to the creator of the universe who transcends "male" or "female." And I don't think it's healthy to *exclusively* refer to God as "Father," ... *but*: Sometimes the reason people *don't* want to call God "Father" is that some folks have had terrible experiences with their "earthly" fathers. And again, I get that. But if we base our refusal to refer to God as "Father" on our bad experiences with fathers, then we lose the opportunity for God's fatherhood to become the prime example for how to *be* a father. When we call God "father," we're not saying that God is like the average human father. We're saying that God's pattern of love and care for God's children is the model that human fathers are called to follow. Same thing applies when we refer to Christ as King. We're not saying that Christ is like the average human monarch. We're saying that one who models God's loving justice and mercy should be the model for *all* human monarchs, be they presidents, governors, mayors or kings.

In our scripture for the morning, Ezekiel gives us insight into God's critique on the abuse of power among the leaders of the world. We also get to hear about God's alternative model for leadership. And I've got to be honest with you ... it's a little weird. It involves sheep. Not that sheep are weird. It's just that in this particular flock, there are bully

sheep. You heard me right. Bully sheep. And these bullies are throwing their weight around and abusing the weaker sheep. So what's happening is that these bully sheep have taken control of the best patches of grass in the pasture. And they're getting fat on this grass while the other sheep are getting skinny and weak. What we have here is a picture of power being exercised for its own benefit. The bully sheep ... the ones who are in power ... use their power to improve their place in the pasture. They could care less about the needs of the other sheep. This is a prime example of power to benefit the powerful. And we're no strangers to this example of power and privilege in our day and age. Yeah, the sheep illustration is a little weird, but only because we aren't sheep herders. People in Biblical times who were familiar with sheep understood. The problem is, this model has become such a normal pattern of how power plays out in our society, that we hardly notice it, let alone question it! Sure, we might complain about it sometimes, but come Election Day we're out there standing in line ready to vote for the next batch of bully sheep who'll step in.

But through this prophet Ezekiel, God denounces bullying and power mongering. God promises a different kind of leadership. God says, "I will rescue my people from all the places to which tragedy has scattered them. I will bring them from exile into their own land; and I will feed them on the hills and by the watercourses of the Promised Land. I will feed them with good pasture, they shall lie down in good grazing land. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will let them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

See the difference between the two models? What a contrast! Instead of power that benefits the powerful, we've got power that benefits the most powerless. In sheep terms, we're talking about the lost sheep, the strayed sheep, the wounded sheep, the ones who don't have enough grass to sustain life. The kind of power God exercises is good, healthy, and life-giving. And honestly, without that kind of good healthy power along with good, healthy people to exercise it, the world is a confusing,

frightening mess. Without God's *good power*, the powerless would be even more vulnerable to all the corrupt and abusive games the world's "bully sheep" play. God's good power is selfless and self-giving. And as God's followers, as Christ's church in the world, we are called to prayerfully demonstrate this kind of radically different power with great self-awareness and self-reflection.

But ... we're human. We've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. So that good power is hard to wield because our instinct is to look after our own needs and our own security and our own comforts before we ever get around to being concerned about the needs of others. Every scandal that you've read about over the last few weeks? Every scandal involving a CEO or a Hollywood power broker or a coach or a politician or a lawmaker ... every one of those scandals involves an inappropriate and abusive use of power. And you know, it would be so easy to start bashing all these leaders for the damage they've done to people's lives and people's trust. It would be easy to point a finger at their hypocrisy. But I'm not going to do that. And not because I'm excusing anyone's behaviour. I'm not suggesting that the perpetrators shouldn't be held accountable or face the consequences for their actions. They need to. But I will say it is *tough* being in leadership. That's why our denomination requires our clergy to have boundary trainings and meet continuing education requirements. Every leader needs to be aware of the power and privilege they have and to keep working at understanding those power dynamics and be willing to be accountable for what we say and do especially as it relates to the model held up to us by God.

Here's the reason I've never been very big on "Christ the King Sunday." See, it's only been around since 1925, and it started out as church propaganda. Pope Pius XI and King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy were having a spat over who had control over Vatican City since it was in Italy. Victor Emmanuel said, "Italy has control." Pope Pius said, "No way. We're separate from Italy." And they went back and forth on this until the Pope instituted "The Feast of Christ the King" as a response to what he believed was the growing threat of secularism. So "Christ the

King Sunday” was the church’s way of flexing its muscles and showing the King of Italy that they weren’t going to get bossed around. Which sounds strange doesn’t it? The church ... the Body of Christ in the world ... the embodiment of Jesus’ ministry and witness ... the ambassadors of God’s reign of mercy, grace, love, and humbleness wanted to show Italy how tough and powerful they were. Funny how often we imagine that God exercises divine power in the same way that earthly leaders exercise power in the world. And why not? It’s *in the best interest* of the powerful to persuade others that God is just like them and that God *endorses* their power and the way they use it. So let’s reclaim this “Feast of Christ the King.” Instead of letting it *legitimize* excessive power, let’s *challenge* it.

See, the good news of salvation is that Jesus came to *set us free* from these destructive misconceptions about God that cause us to come up with ridiculous things to put on the church calendar just to show how tough we are. “I will come,” says the Lord, “I will come and seek them out and bind up their wounds and lead them safely to the promised land.” And this sort of imagery carries over into the New Testament too. Jesus reminds us that God isn’t going to push us around or abuse us or burden us with expectations like the power mongers we’ve grown used to. Jesus has come to let us know that we are beloved, cherished, cared for, lifted up, and empowered. Jesus has come to set us free to put our trust in God, knowing that God can be trusted to care for us and lead us safely home. And with all of that, Jesus has come so that we might be set free to live with joy and passion and freedom.