

“Head of the Church”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christ the King Sunday – November 26, 2017

Ephesians 1: 15-23

My mother-in-law’s church just installed a new pipe organ. It’s First Presbyterian Church in Bloomington, and several of you would be familiar with that sanctuary when you attended my father-in-law’s funeral back in April of this year. That congregation has a deep love of classical, traditional music, and this has been a long-time dream of theirs – to replace an aging pipe organ with a new, vibrant instrument that will serve that church for years to come.

Debbie’s brother was on the committee that raised the monies for the organ, and he and a few church members even flew out to Oregon earlier this year to see it being built. A few weeks ago, the pipes and cabinet arrived in Bloomington, and after worship, all who were present for the service were invited to help bring in all the pipes to the sanctuary! It’s now been installed and they have begun using it in worship, with a dedication concert to follow later. It’s a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, and I look forward to hearing it myself one day.

Now, if I had seen and heard about this fifteen years ago, when I was still relatively fresh in ministry, I would probably have been way excited over this for Debbie’s family and their church. But I have to admit – when I saw pictures of the new organ and heard them all talking about it, my first reaction wasn’t the same kind of excitement they had. Instead, it was, “Meh.”

That may be because I have lived through my share of battles in the church. Whether it’s something I’ve gone through myself in ministry, or I’ve heard of colleagues living through in their ministry, there always seems to be something that can both galvanize and divide people. And for some reason, when I saw the pictures of this new organ, I couldn’t help but think of things that have caused division in churches. It might be a large expenditure on an organ or a building addition. It might be how a room is furnished or changed after years of serving a specific purpose. It might be how a program is pushed or supported for years long after it needed to be.

This congregation has that in its history, as well. While we received a great deal of consensus and support for building this sanctuary more than seven years ago, that was not the case when the fellowship hall was built almost thirty years ago. At that time, there were a number of people who wished for a multi-purpose room to be built. When the time came for the congregation to vote, the current design was approved – by

a margin of four votes. Needless to say, several people left John Knox over this decision, and it left many people discouraged and upset.

Too often in the church, we think we know what is right. We believe we have the answers, that we are the experts, and that everyone should follow our lead. It's not that that is wrong - we each have specific talents and gifts that are essential to the Body of Christ functioning at a high, effective level. What becomes troublesome and untenable is when our gifts and talents lead us to be arrogant and self-serving. We might even claim that this is "our" church, or that we are the ones who make the decisions, forgetting, of course, that there is one, and only one, head of the church.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are reminded once again that no matter how many clashes we have within the church, the only voice that ultimately matters is Christ's. So, the real challenge for us as Christ's Body is to be able to hear that voice clearly and unequivocally in all that we do, so that "the fullness of him fills all in all."

In this passage from Ephesians, Paul begins this letter to the church with a prayer. He encourages the Ephesians by noting how he has "heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints." For this reason, Paul does not "cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." It's important to remember that these were letters to believers - those who were early converts to the faith. Some were Jewish believers, some were Gentile believers. In other words, some were old-timers in the faith, and some were fresh and new to faith in God. But Paul was speaking to all of them, encouraging all of them, and reminding them that Christ came for all of them.

"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you" (1:17-18). Wisdom, revelation, enlightened, hope - these are the words which Paul uses to illustrate what it means to hear Christ's voice as the church. Wisdom to know what is best amid all the competing voices. Revelation to know what is God's will. Enlightened to the Spirit's movement. Hope in a future reign of Christ. And all as part of the church's call to bring about Christ's kingly rule here and now.

Paul reinforces this by reminding the Ephesians - and us - that Christ is no ordinary king, but one who is filled with resurrection hope. "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (1:20-21). It is because of this resurrection hope that the church is given its calling to transform the world - from death to life, from despair to hope, from hate to love.

And the church is truly the embodiment of Christ's kingly rule. "And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over

all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:22-23). As John Cole puts it: *As the church celebrates the Reign of Christ, it is reminded, through this great prayer in Ephesians, of an inheritance that is much, much more than individual riches or even a beautiful heaven that awaits. It is the gift of being joined to Christ’s body, becoming an authentic community, to journey alongside one another in the way of Jesus Christ. Edward Farley once wrote of the “empathetic union” between Father and Son at the point of the cross. The author of Ephesians appears to be suggesting that the same divine empathy now extends to the church as the body of Christ. For the Ephesians, and for us, that means that whether we were there in the beginning or have been grafted in as straggling branches, Christ is still Lord. He was Lord in the beginning, he will be Lord in the end. Even now, he is Lord* (John Cole, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 330*).

It is not an easy thing to leave the world out there when we come inside this place. We bring with us our stresses from work, our concerns about our family, our worries about what’s going on in our city, nation, and world at large. I don’t think we are meant to leave those things totally when we gather as the people of God. That’s unrealistic, to be sure. Part of being an authentic community of faith is recognizing what we each are carrying with us as we gather here for worship, for study, for service in Christ’s name.

But there is one area that we can always do a better job of leaving the world behind, and that is how the world treats one another as children of God. In our workplaces, many times individual achievement and drive is valued over teamwork and mutual respect. In our school settings, we are valued by a grade someone gives us, rather than who we are as a human being. We often bring that back with us to the church, making snap judgments about others, rather than seeing them as a fellow sister or brother in Christ. We bring the ambition of the world into the church, stating that we know what is best and ignoring all other opinions.

This morning, we are electing women and men to serve as leaders of our congregation in the years ahead. These individuals will serve as elders, deacons, and trustees at John Knox, and in so doing, they will be entrusted to make the best decisions for our congregation according to God’s will.

When they are ordained and installed in January, they will be asked many questions as mandated by our church’s Book of Order. Two of those questions relate to Christ’s kingly role in our lives of faith. First, “Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” Second, “Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?”

Please note, they are not asked, “Do you trust in yourself, acknowledge Frank as head of the church, and through the pastor believe in God?” They are not asked, “Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to the longest-serving member, under the authority of your best friend, and be continually guided by your conscience?” Leadership and discipleship in Christ’s Church is not about ego and ambition. It is all about humility and obedience to the one who is Lord and King for all in all.

On this Christ the King Sunday, may we all remember the reason we are here: to serve in joyful obedience to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. “He was Lord in the beginning, he will be Lord in the end. Even now, he is Lord (ibid).”

Thanks be to God. Amen.