

## **A Chat With The Boss**

11/27/22

(Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 1:68-79)

This Sunday is the last Sunday in the Season of Pentecost. And, although it is not the last Sunday in our calendar year, it is also the last Sunday in the Church Year. Today in many churches today will be celebrated as “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday. It is a period on the sentence of the year, when we pause to remind ourselves one last time of the one who has reigned over us the past year.

And it is a special day for us in another way, as we celebrate bringing Paul and Julia officially into membership. We know that they have already accomplished the most critical task of establishing their location in the pews! So, all the rest is just small stuff.

The readings today also make a shift away from the past and toward the future. We leave All Saints and wistful memories of the past behind with the fall leaves and turn toward the future and the expectation of things to come. Next Sunday will be the First Sunday of Advent and we will once again begin watching and waiting expectantly for the birth of the Christ child in our midst.

## **True Ruler and False**

As you might expect on “Christ the King” Sunday, one of the main themes in the readings is that there is only one legitimate authority in this world, one true author of all good things and that this chosen one of God, will rescue the faithful from every false authority and from the destruction wreaked on the world by his usurpers.

In the Old Testament reading, Jeremiah sets forth this theme by first decrying the “shepherds who scatter God’s flock” and then by describing how God will whisk the people away and re-establish them under a legitimate shepherd, where they can be fruitful and multiply.

And in the second reading from Colossians, Paul describes the same rescue operation, but this time using the language of mysterious powers and spiritual redemption. Through the true King, he says, the Son and chosen one, God will deliver us from the “powers of darkness”.

These are the powers that are greater than any one person; illusive and destructive . “Powers of darkness” so called, (obviously not as a reference to skin color) but because it is as though we were being stalked by a creature prowling in the night, invisible and yet deadly.

Paul adds to our understanding of our true sovereign, as shepherd of the flock, by describing him in equally mysterious terms, as the one who is “in the image of the invisible God”, but with greater power than the powers of darkness. From him shines forth the light that scatters the darkness. And the footsteps of the saints are guided by his light.

And when we move to the Gospel reading, this language of light that is used to describe our true Sovereign takes on a beautifully poetic form in the promise that “By the tender mercy of our God, dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.” The poetic nature of that verse describes the beautiful and inspiring way Christ chooses to enter into and rule in our lives

### **Who’s the Boss?**

But I don’t think we should let ourselves be lulled into thinking that the message here is just about savoring tender feelings. These readings are also saying something important about how we operate as a church and in the world. They are also a statement about who does and who doesn’t have authority over our lives. Put more bluntly, they are letting us know, in no uncertain terms, who’s boss.

Paul and Julia, if you were becoming members without prior church experience, one way of orienting you to this congregation would be to tell you who the boss is here. And I know that you, like all the rest of us here, already know the appropriate answer (Point upwards).

What this means for us as Christians is that there is no other legitimate basis for authority. Of course people have to fill different roles and provide guidance and oversight. No organization can function without some kind of established order. But no one has intrinsic authority in themselves. There are only people who hold positions on behalf of a community that has prayerfully chosen to extend that privilege to them. And their legitimacy extends only as far as they fulfill their duties in keeping with God's will.

And it is true also of the prophets. In themselves they have no authority. They have only persuasive words. And those words only have legitimacy as God chooses to speak through them.

### **Our Boss**

So since it is pretty clear that we are only supposed to have one boss, let me share a few thoughts about how "the boss" (point up) appears to operate, because she has an interesting way of running the show.

You would think that a good boss is going to be someone who comes out of the office, gathers the staff and then starts giving clear directions “You do this. You do that. And I want it done this way. Now hop to it.” That kind of boss knows what needs to be done, gives you your instructions and you do it. And if you don’t, then we’ll find someone who will. Sort of like the tough side of Lou Grant on the Mary Tyler Moore Show.

And I have to agree that there is great value in that kind of strong leadership and that kind of clarity. Sometimes you need someone with greater experience to tell you to trust them and “just do it” and you’ll see. In fact, there is a sense in which Jesus does this, when he bids us to take up our cross and follow him. He is asking us to follow and believe in his promises, whether we understand it now or not. Following our boss takes faith.

But what I want to draw our attention to is another way our Boss works. More like the gentler side of Lou Grant. He comes out of the office and tells us an interesting story, a parable of sorts, or runs an interesting scenario before our eyes. And then he says to his gathered staff, “What do you think about that?” And then he wanders back into his office and closes the door and the staff is left to ponder what on

earth the boos was getting at... until the Spirit dawns on them and they feel that they know how they should respond.

They feel the presence of a light, like the “light of dawn” breaking into the darkness. Perhaps the light first comes to one and then another and another. And the light grows and the shadows of night disperse, and their understanding illuminated the landscape, so that they can see what is really there and move forward without stumbling.

It is up to them to decide how they will walk forward into the newly illuminated landscape. It is somewhat daunting and yet exhilarating. Daunting because the boss has not told them exactly what to do and exhilarating because they have received the light of understanding to guide them and the freedom to choose the course they will take. It is a light that guides us, not by pulling us on a leash, but by sharing divine insight with us and drawing us willingly in the direction of a life of greater depth and meaning and beauty.

### **A Visit from the Boss**

It seems to me that I had such a “tender and merciful, dawn breaking into my darkness” experience last Sunday at Fete Noel. In other words, the boss came out of the office and called me over.

There I was, sucking up way too much coffee, as usual, when Santa appeared. Pretty soon the little ones realized he was there and the line began to form. A tremendous warmth of spirit and excitement filled the air as Santa assumed his role and began to interact with the kids. The joyfulness of the moment came over me too and I joined the others, cheering on and taking pictures as the awestruck children drew up the courage to confide in this big affable man in his funny red suit.

Of course, because I am a minister and my calling is all about pointing to the one true sovereign, there was also a part of me that felt a little bit uptight. Why is it that all this warmth is going to Santa Claus instead of to Jesus? Why is it that in our culture which is already rampantly materialistic and self-centered, do we go out of our way to cultivate in our children a relationship with someone who's fundamental question for them is, "What toy do you want for Christmas?" There is only room for one God in the church and it isn't Santa Claus.

By the way, I also get a bit uptight about Halloween. The ghosts and goblins are fun. But the enjoyment of movies and scenarios that are especially violent and frightening troubles me in a world in which those fantasies all too often become reality. I can hear my son saying, "Lighten up, Dad."

Anyhow, there I was feelings a mix of enjoyment and unease about Santa, when Santa, who is actually \_\_\_\_\_, came up and we started talking. First he greeted me with several different fist bumps, including one called the “squid,” none of which I had ever heard of.

Then he told me a story that he calls the “Kneeling Santa,” about how he went into a church one time dressed to do his Santa gig, and the priest told him to just do his thing, but not talk with the kids. I think that the priest probably shared my unease; that he wanted the kids to learn more about God in church and less about how to get more toys.

Anyhow, dressed in full Santa gear, he went over to the altar and bent down on his knee and said a prayer and then went on about his role as Santa with the kids. Afterwards the priest came over and thanked him and told him that many in the congregation were moved by what they had seen.

This is the point at which I think the boss finished his story and went back into the office to leave me thinking about it.

And I guess that a kind of dawn began to break over me and wash away a fear that I have been harboring for our congregation. I had been thinking that perhaps the jolly and colorful Santa Claus and the

materialistic outlook that he so often represents might be the God our congregation is more drawn to serve, than the plainly dressed and outcast Jesus, the gracious and generous servant of all. Like the priest in the story, I too was jealous on behalf of Jesus, my sovereign Lord.

But the story also put Santa Claus and Fete Noel in a new and more promising light for me. Because I think the message was that Santa doesn't always have to be in conflict with Jesus. If Santa himself is a person of faith who, in doing what he does, is seeking to make that role an expression of his allegiance to God's love, then the true God is still the one who is being served.

In a way, I think we are all like kneeling Santa's. It could not be otherwise. We have inherited a world in which we inhabit the roles that people understand. Those roles are like so many Santa Suits. They represent some ideas that are in conflict with our faith and others that are in line with God's will. A mixed bag. (Did you know that the big red Santa suit is a marketing invention of the Coca-Cola Company?).

And yet, the way we serve God is not by refusing to put them on but by putting on our suit, and then going to the altar and kneeling before the altar and asking God to fill that suit in a way that will serve God's love

and give God the glory, whether we are dressed as a police officer, a cashier, a homemaker, student or as Santa Claus.

Even Fete Noel, I think, is like a costume that our church puts on every year. Everybody recognizes and knows how to relate to it. And it could easily be that some will see its only significance in terms of the exchange of money and goods. If that is so, then we are in direct conflict with Jesus who overturned the table of the money changers in the temple.

But when we kneel and pray before the altar, and ask God to help us fill Fete Noel with his love and we dedicate it to God's glory, it is not in conflict. We are living in the world, but our hearts belong to God. And I think this is spectacularly the case, because we have done it as an expression of God's love and generosity, receiving no material benefit for ourselves other than the joy of knowing that the profits will be sown back into the larger community to bring hope and relief to others.

So the little chat with the Boss did leave me with a gift that dawned on me as I sat on Santa's lap (Yes, I was made me sit in his lap). God's gift to me from Santa. It was just that idea. Santa is just a role; like a glove that someone wears. But the hand that works the glove belongs to

God, and we don't have to be jealous of the light that shines when people see Santa instead of Jesus. Because if that Santa is being the best possible Santa, the light that draws people to him will really be none other than the light of Jesus, reigning in Santa.

I also think that Lou Grant is kind of an interesting way of thinking about the way God behaves as our boss. I apologize to those of you who are either too young or never saw the Mary Tyler Moore Show. He was a chubby and affable news room boss. Cantankerous and bossy, sometimes shuffling around the office, depressed about the state of things. But also surprisingly vulnerable and kind and given to saying odd things, but becoming ever more endearing to us as we watched him and his staff go through the events of life together.

Now all I have to do is get out of my head the idea that our invisible boss actually looks like Lou Grant!