

Zoar Lutheran Church
November 23, 2025 (Christ the King Sunday)
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So today is Christ the King Sunday. It's a bit of an unusual feast day for those of us who have been holding up No Kings signs recently. It feels a little strange to me as a democracy-loving American. In my research for today's sermon, I learned that Christ the King Sunday is relatively new. It was conceptualized by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the rise of fascism in Italy and Spain, the rise of communism in Russia, and the popularity of secularism in the west. Pope Pius hoped to send a clear message of opposition to totalitarianism by naming Christ as the one and only King.¹ In light of this history and on this 100 year anniversary, Christ the King Sunday seems like a feast day worth celebrating, especially for this democracy-loving American.

And the readings from today all center on leadership. The reading from Jeremiah talks all about shepherds, which in the ancient world was a metaphor for kings. As God's mouthpiece, Jeremiah has some choice words for the kings of his time. He cries, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! ... It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them." (Jer. 23: 1-2) If nothing else, this passage from Jeremiah reminds us that the tactic of dividing people against one another to concentrate power at the top is as old as time. It's straight out of the playbook for authoritarianism, a strategy that is definitely not favored by God. Jeremiah prophecies about new shepherds/kings who "shall no longer fear or be dismayed" (Jer. 23:4) but who instead will offer security through justice.

And our two New Testament readings give more insights into how Christ exemplifies this kind of leadership. The Colossians reading could accompany just about any gospel text as it tells the story of Jesus in a credal form. Some scholars think that these verses from Colossians may be the oldest form of a hymn or creed that points to Jesus's being. Many attributes of these verses can be found in later creeds. And, as such, it describes a specific kind of God-ordained leadership. Later in the text, the Pauline author (Colossians is another one that's not an undisputed letter of Paul) writes, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things"

¹ Senn, Frank C. "The Not-so-Ancient Origins of Christ the King Sunday —." Lutheran Forum, November 11, 2017.
<https://www.lutheranforum.com/blog/2017/11/11/the-not-so-ancient-origins-of-christ-the-king-sunday>.

(Col. 1: 19–20). But the Greek word for reconcile in this case is *apokatallasso* (ἀποκαταλλάττειν), which means “to restore a relationship from hostility to friendship”². With this in mind, the Colossians verses could read, “For in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to exchange hostility for friendship in all things”. God was pleased to exchange hostility for friendship in all things. I think it’s this friendship that defines the kind of leadership that God craves and that Jesus epitomizes even when he’s put to death on a cross.

The gospel today depicts a decidedly unfriendly scenario. The leaders, soldiers, and onlookers are mocking Jesus, making fun, and tormenting him. They think the entire situation is hilarious, they even hang a kick me sign over his head in the form of “This is the King of the Jews”. And in their cruel jeering, they shine a spotlight on the fact that Jesus is a certain kind of king – a crucified king. Which was impossible and utterly ridiculous to them. Jesus has been called the upside down king because there was absolutely nothing noble about crucifixions. Fordham University professor L.L. Welborn writes, “... the practice [of crucifixion] was widespread in the Roman world. In speaking of the ubiquity of the cross, I do not have in mind the occasional use of the crucifixion as the ‘supreme penalty’ in notorious cases of ... treason, nor the more frequent use of crucifixion as a means of suppressing rebellious subjects in the provinces, but rather the regular employment of the cross as a punishment for slaves in cities throughout the Roman Empire . . . such places of execution, with crosses and other instruments of torture, were found throughout Italy and probably outside the gates of every large city in the Roman Empire.”³. Jesus was not exceptional in his crucifixion. His cross was one of many erected in the Roman Empire, a tool of terrorism akin to the lynching tree in American history. For Jesus to be a crucified king was an act of solidarity with his followers and friends. It was subversive, inverting what Empire deemed kingly with God’s vision of divine authority.

And when the second “criminal” (we don’t know what his crime is) defends Jesus, supporting him against tyrants and bullies, Jesus turns the hostility of his enemies into friendship for his companion on the cross. He extends mercy to the man and invites him to come alongside him to paradise.

² Ezraproject.com. “Apokatallasso: Turning an Enemy into a Friend – Ezra Project.” Accessed November 19, 2025. <https://ezraproject.com/apokatallasso-turning-an-enemy-into-a-friend/>.

³ Welborn, L. L. “The Culture of Crucifixion and the Resurrection of the Dispossessed: The Interpellation of the Subject in the Roman Empire and Paul’s Gospel as “Truth Event.”” In *Paul and the Philosophers*, 127–40. Fordham University Press, 2021. 136

The theme for the Bishops Convocation that Pr. Michelle and I attended in October was Anam Cara, which is the Celtic concept of “soul friend”. Our Celtic Christian spiritual ancestors used this term to describe a relationship of sacred companionship. A soul friend is that friend who sees you completely as you are and witnesses the God within you. Anam Cara is not a casual friendship. Meaning, there’s a deep mutual trust that transcends time apart or life circumstances. It’s one of those friendships that hold a place of reverence in your heart, not linked to what one does but simply who one is. It is a sacred friendship. Do you have someone like that in your life? Perhaps there are a couple of people in your life that you consider your Anam Cara.

Jesus was an Anam Cara to the gentleman crucified next to him. He was an Anam Cara to his disciples. He is even an Anam Cara to his enemies, as he asks God’s forgiveness for those torturing him. And he is our Anam Cara today. Jesus operated outside the bounds of empire by shepherding God’s people through deep, abiding friend-love. He is the culmination of the leadership prophesied by Jeremiah. Throughout his ministry and teaching, Jesus led through friendship-love. He traveled with his friends, he worked alongside them, he mourned with them, he laughed with them, he died with them. The example of leadership manifested through Christ is an upside down king-ship. It is power with, alongside, and through rather than any kind of power over.

I love the notion of the Kin-dom of God, a variation on Kingdom of God that describes an intimately relational paradise. And God invites us to enter into this kin-dom at all levels. Where are the friend-leaders in our world? It’s easy to look at global and national leadership and see how far we are from friend-leadership but those who exchange hostility for friendship are out there working in our communities right now. Maybe you’re one of them. God calls us to practice this style of leadership at every level. In our families, our workplaces, and our churches. Where there is hostility, we are called to restore it through friendship. What might that mean to be a community that transforms hostility into friendship? Do we have the courage to be an Anam Cara to our enemies and lead others to do the same?

Friends, today marks the end of the liturgical year. Goodbye Luke, see you in a couple of years. It may seem odd that the readings emphasize the cruel end of Jesus’s life as a lead into the season of waiting for his birth. But today’s reading speaks to the immediacy of Jesus’s friend-leadship. He tells his new friend, “today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Not tomorrow or some day

in the future. Mercy comes today. I wonder if the lectionary curators want to give us this little gift before we enter into the darkness of Advent. I wonder if they wanted to remind us that Jesus lived and died in solidarity with the poor and oppressed before we get caught up in celebrations of his birth. I don't know. But the words of Colossians, using Anam Cara language, echo through my heart, "For in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to exchange hostility for friendship in all things". God tells us that God desires leadership through friendship and Jesus shows us what that looks like. As I look at the week ahead, I hope to follow Jesus's friendship-love lead into meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and to the Thanksgiving table. Where will Christ, our upside-down Anam Cara king lead you this week?