

**St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church**  
**Christ the King**  
**November 22, 2015**

This morning, I'd like to tell you a story. It's a story about an encounter with suffering that changed my life forever. It's a story about how God revealed himself to me long ago, a story about Jesus' invitation to all of us to a life of service.

I was 21-years-old, recently graduated from college, when I went to Haiti for three months to work with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in their hospital for children. The mission of the Sisters is to provide care and a dignified death for dying children, most of whom come from the extremely impoverished and densely populated shantytown called Cité Soleil in the capitol city of Port-au-Prince.

Most of these children had been given over to the care of the Sisters by their parents who were just too poor to provide for their basic needs. Others were sick, and in desperate need of medical care.

About half way through the summer, I realized that many of the children who came into the care of the Sisters were dying from easily preventable diseases like malnutrition and diarrhea. I will never forget the

day when one of those children - only a year and a half - died as I rocked her in my arms.

Holding her lifeless body, I followed one of the Sisters through a maze of hallways to the back corner of the hospital, to a room I had never been to and didn't know existed. Inside the room, there were concrete counters, and on these counters were a number of tiny bodies covered with white sheets. I placed the child I was carrying onto the cold cement slab and the Sister covered her body with a white sheet. There she lay among the other children; children whose names were very often unknown; children who never had even the slightest chance at life; children who, in the eyes of the world, didn't count; children who had no voice.

This encounter with the suffering of the innocent ~ with unthinkable, unimaginable poverty ~ marked the beginning of my spiritual quest to answer some questions that would either make or break my faith in God: Why, when so many of us live such extravagant lives, are children dying? Does any one care? Does God care? What kind of a God could allow this to happen? Can I believe in a God that remains passive in the face of violence, oppression, inhuman poverty and great sorrow? Is faith in God even relevant today? Why believe in God at all?

A few days after her death, I was talking story with a Catholic priest who came to do Mass every week for the Sisters. He told me a version of this parable. It's a parable about charity and justice.

*One summer in the village, the people in the town gathered for a picnic. As they leisurely shared food and conversation, someone noticed a baby in the river, struggling and crying. The baby was going to drown!*

*Someone rushed to save the baby. And then, they noticed another baby in the river, and they pulled that baby out. Soon, more babies were seen drowning in the river, and the townspeople were pulling them out as fast as they could. It took great effort, and they began to organize their activities in order to save the babies as they came down the river.*

*Then two of the townspeople started to run upstream along the shore of the river.*

*"Where are you going?" shouted one of the rescuers. "We need you here to help us save these babies!"*

*The two replied, "We are going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!"*

This priest explained to me that ~ as Christians, as people of faith, as followers of Jesus ~ we need to respond to the needs of those who suffer

right now through acts of compassion, and we also need to address the systemic structures in society that create this kind of suffering in the first place.

He told me that the poor in the developing world did not need another well intentioned, do-gooder from the first world spending significant sums of money to travel to places of poverty to volunteer. There are plenty of poor in America, he said.

Furthermore, what his people needed were activists and advocates who would be a voice for the voiceless, who would return to their own communities to tell the story of the suffering they had encountered, and who would mobilize the privileged of the first world to open their hearts to the cry of the poor, to stand in solidarity with them, to work with them for their liberation and freedom from oppression and poverty.

He encouraged me to go to Seminary and to continue asking the question: What does God require of me in this life? How can I best follow Jesus?

It was in Seminary, as I studied with the Jesuits, that God revealed himself to me in a completely new light. God unveiled himself as a God

who identifies with the suffering of the poor and who asks much of those of us who have everything we need.

Mother Teresa recalls from the Scriptures that one of the final statements of Jesus, as he hung crucified on the cross, was: "I thirst." She writes, "In those final moments, when he was deprived of every consolation, dying in absolute poverty, left alone, despised and broken in body and soul, betrayed by his closest friends and even God, Jesus spoke of his thirst" - a real human need - he spoke of "his thirst not only for water but for love, for sacrifice," for mercy, for compassion.

I was completely taken by this Jesus ~ this man who knew and experienced great sorrow. This man who cried tears of compassion for others. This man who, in Matthew Chapter 25, called his disciples, and us, to acts of charity and compassion, to have mercy on the most vulnerable ~ by giving drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, and comfort to the dying. This man who said, "Whenever you do these things to the least of these, you do it to me."

Jesus calls us to these acts of charity - to save the drowning babies in the river. And he also calls us to works of justice - to walk upstream and to

start asking questions, to dare to dream of a world in which all people would have the means to live a dignified life.

Today we celebrate Christ the King. In the Gospel reading, Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” This is not a religious question. It is a political one. What Pilate really wants to know is, “Are you a political threat to me?”

I love the way the Rev. Dr. Alison Boden, the Dean of Religious Life at Princeton University, describes the difference between these two rulers.

Pilate, she writes, seeks power and authority to advance himself. He wants more of everything, and he wants it all for himself. He establishes his power by reigning with ruthless terror. People follow his orders because they fear his violent wrath. Pilate’s rule, from the top of the system down to the bottom ~ from the violent occupation of the land by Rome down to the exploitation of the poorest of the poor through unrelenting taxation ~ is characterized by violence, greed, exploitation, and cruelty.

The reign of Jesus, Boden notes, is the complete opposite.

- “Jesus has infinite power, but he does not use it to promote or enrich himself, he uses it to empower *others*, especially the most lowly.”

- “He does not make people serve him hand and foot; he washes **their** feet. He lowers himself, he humbles himself . . . to kneeling in front of modest people and washing the dirt off their knobby, filthy feet, between their toes and under their long toenails. He becomes not the master but the servant.”
- “He doesn’t send his followers off to die for him in battle; he doesn’t sacrifice **their** lives, as does Pilate to augment his own power. He dies **for** them. He sacrifices his own life so that they might have life in abundance.”
- “He doesn’t plunder their meager resources to add to his own wallet. He takes nothing from the people but gives them everything possible in this life and the next; loaves and fishes for the hungry now, eternal life to come.”

In the weeks to come, as we prepare for Christmas, as we prepare as a nation to open our hearts, our borders and our doors to Syrian refugees, as we here in Hawai’i shelter our houseless sisters and brothers ~ Hawai’i’s “untouchables” ~ we will remember that Jesus was born into the lowliest of circumstances - poor and homeless. We will remember that Jesus himself, shortly after he was born, became a refugee, his parents fleeing to Egypt to

escape the violence of King Herod who sought to rid the province of this newborn king by killing all boys, 2 and under, in Bethlehem and its vicinity. Born into poverty, Jesus then lived among the poor for the whole of his life. He identified with the poor and the outcast because he **WAS** one of them.

So, where does our hope lie? In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is “not from this world.” No, it is not. It is not from this world, but it will without a doubt be established in this world. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was not some spiritual utopia that would exist in some far off place called heaven. When Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come and for his will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven," he was teaching us to pray that God's kingdom would be established on our earth. Jesus's Kingdom of God is about the transformation of the world on *THIS* side of death.

Even more, Jesus declared that his kingdom belonged to the least of these. He likened his kingdom to a great banquet feast in which the very poorest of the poor ~ the blind, the lame, the crippled, the outcast, the sick and the dying ~ would be given seats of honor at the table. Jesus' kingdom will be a political and earthly reality in which all are welcome to feast at the great banquet, to dine at the table of humanity, to receive God's merciful

compassion. And, in his kingdom, there will be no more suffering, no more oppression, no more violence, no more tears.

I am a Christian, and I am a priest today, because I fell in love with this King named Jesus of Nazareth. I fell in love with his vision for the Reign of God on this earth. And, the truth is, as followers of Jesus, there is no greater joy than accepting God's invitation to make God's dream a reality this side of death, right here, right now.

So, here we are on this Sunday morning in this parish, in this neighborhood, worshiping Christ our King. We have been gifted with this king's parables, stories and words that are 2,000 years old. Stories that still have the power to speak truth into our own lives, to convict and convert our hearts to the cry of the poor and the suffering in our midst.

We are reminded that while we live in this world, this world full of violence and suffering, we are not of this world.

- We answer to another king, a king whose kingdom has not yet come, a king who calls us - no matter how discouraged we get - to fix our eyes on the vision and promise of God's reign.
- We work for a king who asks us to continue works of mercy and justice in his name so that his kingdom will indeed come.

- We speak with the same conviction of our king who spoke truth to power, and who condemned the structural and systemic injustice of his day.
- With the courage of Jesus, we take up the cause of the most vulnerable ~ we stand in solidarity with the suffering innocents, and we promise to always tell their story so that the world never forget them.
- And, we proclaim the king who loved his people so much that he sacrificed his own life on that cross that we might live.

May this King live in our hearts, in our words, in our actions, this day and forever more. Amen.