

Sermon by the Rector

Last after Pentecost - A; November 23, 2008

[Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24](#)

[Psalm 95:1-7a](#)

[Ephesians 1:15-23](#)

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

Immanuel Kant said we should always treat human beings as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.

The world as we know it would end if we adhered strictly to Kant's teaching. Even when we love, we love another person for the sake of something larger, or other, than that person – as a means to some end. We make friends, and also fall in love and marry, partly in order to make our parents and family happy and proud, or to make them angry; because a person we befriend or love or marry helps us work through, or avoid working through, some issue from our own past; all of the above, and more.

At work, and in the political world, the ability to use other people as means to one's own ends can lead to success. We tend to judge people on whether their ends, their goals, are noble and worthy, and on whether their use of others as means to reach them is subtle and diplomatic, not on whether they in fact use other human beings as means to their ends. The latter is a given.

Then there's church. In small churches like Grace especially, we recruit people, plug them in to positions we need filled. If this isn't using another human being as a means to an end, I don't know what is.

Let me get the confession out of the way right now: I'm the recruiter-in-chief. Once somebody comes for the second time, I'm already thinking about how they might help out with our many, maybe too many, programs and ministries. And if lots of people weren't on the recruiting case, we'd be in trouble.

Here's the trouble. At the center of our being, we don't want to be means to anybody's end. We don't want people to look beyond us, or through us, or around us. We want people to look right at us, and see us for who we are. We know almost instantaneously when somebody's sizing us up, drawing conclusions about whether we'll serve their ends or not, fit into the slot they need filled. And oh my goodness, we catch ourselves doing this all the time. Take it from the head Grace recruiter.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We celebrate the lordship, the universal sovereignty, of the One who has been elevated over every rule and power and authority, to whom all praise and glory is due.

In the days when monarchs ruled, the king or queen embodied the people. The people's encounters with each other, how they treated one another, had meaning insofar as they

enhanced the majesty and authority of the monarch, and the people themselves drew their identity from the monarch's embodiment of their own. Shakespeare's Lear brings this across with unrivalled power and poignancy. As the aging king despoils himself of his cares and responsibilities, in order to "shuffle unburthen'd" toward death, the realm of England devolves into howling chaos. Without a king to draw glory from their realization, the rules governing the people's common life lost their power to compel. The people were means to the end of enhancing the monarch's authority, and when this structure of meaning crumbled the people had no reason to constrain their worst impulses.

How different things are with Christ the King. In this remarkable parable, we learn that this king draws all his glory, majesty and authority from things his people do for each other without any reference whatsoever to his glory, majesty and authority. "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, lonely or in prison, Lord?": the sheep's blindness to the higher theological implications of their actions redounds precisely to their credit in the King's eyes. They fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison for the sake of these same people, nothing more.

This is Annual Meeting Sunday. We hear and read reports about the ministries of this beloved community. We do this in hopes that members who are less involved will find a place to commit some of their time and talent, as well as their treasure.

But here's what today's theme and readings compel us to recall. None of this busy-ness, none of these programs and ministries, have any meaning – in fact, they do damage – unless they lead us to look not through, beyond or around, but at, each other. From the homeless person who comes for food and conversation on Saturdays to our most well-off members to the musicians and artists who bring their gifts to this place to the regular attender to the sometime seeker, every member of the Grace family comes here because they're worthy of attention in their own right and for their own sakes.

The world would fall apart if we never treated each other as means to various ends. But it wouldn't be worth preserving if we never moved beyond this necessity.

We celebrate a marvel today. The universal King we serve derives all his authority and majesty not from how his subjects regard him, but how they regard and treat each other.