

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Christ and Tattoos

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 24, 2013

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King—Based on Luke 23:33-43

I have just read a new memoir that is making a bit of a splash in the religious world. It is provocatively titled *Pastrix: the Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*. Pastrix, as far as I can tell, is a made-up word to poke gentle fun at those who have trouble imagining a woman pastor, combining pastor and dominatrix. The author, Nadia Bolz-Weber, is a Lutheran pastor, who happens to be a woman—with a certain flare. She is covered in tattoos and piercings the latter about which I need no further information than what I have, whose language would make most sailors proud and some blush, and who really seems to love God in a profound way and to be searching to know God more and more through her experience of Christ in the world. She lives in Denver, which is one reason I have not had her as my guest in The Forum; the other is I'd be so worried about what she might say that I'd probably have to medicate myself rather too thoroughly to be functional. A recovering addict, she says that when she finally began to return to church after her childhood led her to give it up, she knew only how to get to church basements, where she had spent a good portion of recent years, finding her life again by attending AA meetings.

In case you haven't noticed, today is the Feast of Christ the King, which at first and possibly last glance seems like a strange occasion to mention such an odd and even outrageous character as Nadia. And, yet, she was my salvation this week as I prepared to give this sermon. For years, I have wiggled in and around the notion of our parading Jesus out as the King on this day, a title he never assumed for himself, and not parading him only but him affixed to the violent implement of his death, the cross, which oddly we have proceeded over the centuries to ornament with diamonds and gold and other royal jewels. In preaching on Christ the King Sundays, my approach has been that of respectful deconstruction, which is to say that I have beaten around the bush because it is indeed a feast day of the church, one that by convention and desire I am obligated to celebrate. But, my friends, it is one that is deeply problematic for us, certainly so without a close evaluation of what it is we are claiming to be true about Jesus.

For starters, it is an unquestionable, though honestly for us, I think, mostly unconscious, annual reference to a brand of Christian triumphalism that gnaws at the essence of who Jesus was. But as we all know, being unconscious about something does not negate its effect and, in fact, often exacerbates it. Triumphalism, the notion of one group's claim to ultimate truth over another, is not good in any religion. And, sadly we, as Christians, share a role in the world's bloody history of wars deriving from such positions. In the current culture of religious polarity among the brands of Christians in this country, we know the damage done even within families in which each side claims the "right" view of who and how Christ is. And if that isn't enough to cloud the day, add to the mix the idea that many hold that this "king-Christ" will deliver good Christians who pray right and often enough from all their struggles, certainly the big ones; and what you have is a religious mess.

And so this week in praying and thinking about Christ the King I was acutely aware of what I did not need. I was not interested in stories of a victorious Christ, who sails happily above the real world, helping really pious people get more pious, not interested in one who hardly, if at all, remembers what it feels like to have boots on the ground where many things do not work out perfectly or where every one gets well—and certainly not one depicted, as Christ the King often is in art, in royal garb while hanging on the cross as though he got dressed up to be crucified. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a sharp contrast, was just what I needed. She is as real and gritty

as it gets; and though even I am on occasion put off by the ways she says it and wonder why she doesn't try to cover up some of those tattoos—maybe with a nicely tailored suit or something, anything high-necked and long-sleeved—the way she knows Christ, up close and personal, is the way I want to know Christ. And more than that, it is the way Christ has to be known in the world if there is any hope for its transformation.

The truth is that Jesus did not live and die as a king of anything. The word *king* is inherently wrong, particularly as it becomes attached to the Christ of faith. Feminists rightly claim that the term's gender exclusivity in effect renders Christ inaccessible to many. Surely this Christ, who is the full-blown conflation of the life of Jesus as remembered and the overlay of a church desperately trying to understand its savior, is not bound by gender. But the terminology is more complicated than that alone. It suggests dominion and power and unilateral truth, a suggestion often and effectively reinforced by our beloved hymnody, our triumphal claims about being ultimately right while others are ultimately wrong set to cherished tunes we can sing in our sleep. It is quite extraordinary really. Jesus, the one in whom such ideas have their origin, did not live like that at all. He lived a life of compassion and generosity, and his spirit was broad and spacious. Regarded a heretic for his liberal and lavish loving, he aligned himself not with the "kingly" crowd but found his great joy and the fullness of his voice among the poorest and those with the least power.

Christ the King is so certain, certainty being quite kingly and powerful. Is that Christ really available to most of us? I should speak only for myself—and this week for the tattooed Nadia. My Christ is not the king of certainty. A friend of mine, whom I haven't seen in years, wrote yesterday, in the midst of my writing, to say that he wanted to talk with me soon about God. I thought, "Oh, my, he may want to know more than I can give him." Certainty does not seem terribly godly to me the older I get. It seems to limit so much, prescribing details that surely can't be so easily transcribed. More and more, I think that the wisest words are the fewest, that emphatic claims must be increasingly few and far between, and that what best reflects our faith journey are extravagant expressions of hope and wildly fervent words of thanksgiving. It is an interesting twist that even for me, one who has confessed as a failed contemplative, the greatest knowing of God now most often comes in wordless moments of prayer and active moments of loving others.

So in a word, I don't have a good answer for what it means that Christ is King. I do know that in a few minutes at the end of the service, we shall sing *Crown Him with Many Crowns*, which suggests the opposite of everything I have been saying. And I will sing out loud. I have sung that hymn all my life and can sing it in all four parts! I am able to live with this by virtue of a claim that is perhaps self-serving, but here it is: Living with considerable dissonance, with the capacity to resonate with what appear to be and sometimes are contradictory notions, with the feeling that both/and works in most cases of faith much better than either/or, is the mark of the spiritually mature. The fact that, as some point out, this claim is also a sign of schizophrenia worries me only a bit.

For you see, all of this is an art, not a science. We are not even close to having it figured out. But as long as a Nadia, or someone like her, comes along occasionally to remind us that knowing and honoring Christ is first and forever about loving others, while we will still not be able to pinpoint our theology with doctrinal purity—God deliver us from that—we will be fine, just fine, because when love resides at the center of what we do, the heart of God is never far away.

In the name of God: *Amen*.