

SERMON
By: Gail Fricker

“Upside-down Kingdom”

November 25, 2018

Revelation 1:4b-8, John 18:33-37

Reign of Christ Sunday

Story of Ragman by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

One Friday morning I noticed a young man on the street. He was handsome and strong, but he was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new. In his clear tenor voice, he shouted,

“Rags! Rags! New rags for old! I take your tiered rags! Rags!”

I thought to myself how out of place this man seemed. He was tall, strong, his eyes flashed with intelligence. How strange that couldn't find another job than to be a ragman in the inner city. There was something about him that made me curious, so I followed him.

Soon the Ragman saw a young woman sitting on the steps of her front porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding tears. Her shoulders were hunched over in a hopeless position. She was surrounded by broken toys, tin cans and pampers.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly he walked to the woman and said so gently to her: “give me your rag, and I'll give you another.”

Carefully he took the crumpled stained handkerchief from her hand, and gave her a linen cloth, clean and new. She blinked, with eyes filled with hope, from the gift to the giver.

Then, as the Ragman pulled his cart away, he did a strange thing. He put her handkerchief up to his own face, and he began to weep. His shoulders were shaking just as the woman's had – but as I looked over my shoulder, the woman no longer cried.

I followed the Ragman like a child who could not turn away from the mystery.

“Rags! Rags! New rags for old!”

In a little while the Ragman came across a child playing in her front yard. A blood-stained bandage covered a scar on her bald head, her eyes were empty, and her skin was yellow hue. The Ragman took pity on the child. A took a bright yellow bonnet from his cart. Slowly he loosed her bandage, saying, “Give me your rag, and I'll give you mine.” The child could only gaze at him while he removed her bandage and set the yellow bonnet on her bald head. Then he tied her bandage on his own head, and as I gasped as I noticed the sickness had come with

the bandage. Blood began to trickle down the Ragman's neck, and his skin began to turn yellow and pale.

"Rags! Rags! I take old rags for new!" his voice called out as he walked along sobbing, bleeding, hunched over, and pale skin.

He followed the road, pulling his cart, and stopped at the traffic light – where a man was standing, a sign was around his neck, and he was holding a cracked cup of loose change in one hand, and the other seemed stuffed in his pocket. The Ragman looked at him:

"Do you have a job?" he asked the man on the street corner.

The man sneered. He seemed angry. He pulled out the arm from his coat pocket and revealed that he had no arm from the elbow down.

"Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine" said the Ragman in a quiet but authoritative voice. The one armed man took off his jacket, and so did the Ragman. I trembled at what I saw – for the Ragman's arm stayed in the sleeve, and when the other man put it on, he suddenly has two good arms again. A smile came across the man's face – he looked at the Ragman, who just said to him:

"Go to work."

"Rags! Rags! I take old rags for new!" his voice was getting more and more tired.

He hobbled a long pushing the cart with his one arm, sobbing intermittently, bleeding. As he walked along, he found an old man curled up over a grate by a store front. The man was unconscious, hunched in a ball for warmth, a threadbare army blanket over him and with empty bottles laying beside him. The Ragman stopped. He took the blanket and wrapped it around himself, and for the drunk he left new clothes.

It was hard to keep up with Ragman as he made his way out of town. He seemed exhausted, he was stumbling, bleeding and sobbing, but he walked with a purpose. I wanted to see where he was going; to know what it was that drove him – so I followed. He came to the landfill at the edge of town. I watched as he climbed the pile of garbage, and as he cleared a space on the top of the hill. Then the tired Ragman lay down. He pillowed his head on the handkerchief and jacket, he covered his bones with the army blanket. And then – he sighed deeply, and he died.

(prayer)

Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ Sunday. We can sing hymns about Glory and Honour for our Redeemer King. But do we stop to think about what Christ's kingdom was really like? Jesus says to Pilate:

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." (Matthew 18:36)

These words have often been misunderstood. They are often interpreted that Jesus' kingdom is in another world – in heaven maybe. But really, Jesus is perhaps referring to the fact that his kingdom is 'not of this world' because it is totally different from what anyone expected.

Think about Jesus' time on earth:

- It began with his birth in a dirty, smelly, drafty stable.
- As a child he grew up in the family of a carpenter – there wouldn't have been much money to spare, and their lodgings was likely a one room dwelling.
- Throughout his Ministry he wandered from town to town, with no income, and no guarantee of a roof over his head. He depended on the hospitality of strangers for food and lodgings.
- He went out of his way to spend time with the poor, the sick, the social outcasts.
- His best friends were fishermen and tax collectors
- He chose to ride on a lowly donkey for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem
- And his death on the cross was so appalling that it combined excruciating torture with total humiliation. He was paraded through the streets, ridiculed by bystanders, crucified naked, and left to hang with bodily excretions in full view. It was a death reserved for rebellious slaves – not kings!

There is no doubt that the Jewish people were not expecting this to be the profile for the coming Lord. This is not what they expected to bow down to in humble praise. In the weeks ahead when we talk about the Magi coming to Christ's birth, we will be reminded that even these wise men who had been waiting and waiting for the new King – expected to find him in a palace – not a stable.

No. This is not the picture of the expected Kingdom of God. It is an upside-down kingdom.

But it is the Kingdom that Jesus came to show us. In Philippians 2:7, Paul reminds us that Jesus:

"emptied himself, taking the form of a slave."

Jesus' kingdom was not one of riches, glory and honor – he chose to 'empty himself' of that grand and glorious state of being, and instead he humbled himself to become a slave – born in lowly stable and dying a slave's death. He told Pilate:

the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. (Matthew 18:37)

It is no wonder that Pilate, and others didn't recognize Jesus as the King, Lord, and Savior of the world. They were all looking for something else. They weren't looking for 'the truth.'

And what about us today? Do we recognize Christ's kingdom around us? Are we looking for the Truth?

It's easy for us to come to church on a Sunday and sing hymns of glory and Honor to our Christ the King, but do we stop and think about how Jesus' kingdom was and is one of justice and love?

Have there been times when like Jesus followers, we have failed to fight and defend Jesus' kingdom? Do we choose the comfort of this world's norm, rather than working to establish a new heaven? Do we seek to go with the flow, rather than embody Jesus' countercultural approach?

What action can each of take that will make this world closer to the Kingdom that Jesus intended? Many of us donate our time and money to various events. That's good. But, it requires more than just donating to charity – we need to stand up and speak out against injustice, poverty, inequality. When hate crimes have risen by 39% in the last year in North America. It is time for us to speak Christ's truth against power.

We know that Jesus is Lord. So let us sing that loud and clear every day! Let's us not put Jesus on a high throne in the clouds – where we just need to think about him on Sundays. We are called to be priests and to serve him. So, it is time for us to work together as servants of God and fight daily for the Kingdom of God as Jesus intended it. A kingdom where the 'last will be first.' It is time for us really mean those words that we say each Sunday - "Your kingdom come your will be done."

And when we do serve God with all our hearts, we will begin to see Christ's kingdom all around us ... in the single parent struggling to provide for her children; in the sick and injured child; in the unemployed person begging for change; in the homeless person sleeping on the street; or the mentally depressed person that has turned to alcohol for relief.

When we reach out to each of these people, we will be reaching out to Christ. We will be restoring his kingdom, and his reign. And to that, we can say

"to him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen" (Revelations 1:6)