

November 25, 2018 Reign of Christ Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-8, John 18, 33-37

[Huffington Post, 11-19-12, John Krawczynski. Ideas and lines from my own sermon from 11-25-12 Salem English Lutheran.
Star Tribune, 10-8-18, Dennis Bracken, "Legendary St. John's Coach John Gagliardi dies at 91".
J-Weekly, 11-9-18, Rabbi Mychal Copeland, "At my synagogue, I'll take 20 Mennonites over one armed guard.]

Grace and peace to you from the One who is, the One who was, and the One who is to come. Amen.

Anyone remember the last time I used a football analogy in a sermon at Hope?!

Mark it down! (And no, I'm not going to talk about the Vikings and the Packers!)

Seven weeks ago today, long time St. John's University football coach John Gagliardi died at the age of 91. He had coached 60 years for the Johnnies and retired in 2012, the winning-est coach in college football. At his retirement, and then again in October at his death, there were some wonderful articles written about Gagliardi, his record, but also his very way of coaching.

The Huffington Post reported, Gagliardi "played a much larger role than he lets on, shirking the conventions." "Gagliardi banned whistles, tackling and, essentially, bad weather during practice."

"If the notoriously thick swarms of central Minnesota mosquitos were out for blood...he called it a day."

They didn't tackle in practice to avoid injury, something about why get injured in a stupid play on Wednesday and then not be able to play for a victory on a Saturday

Trusting quarterbacks to call plays, Gagliardi re-defined what it could mean to be a college football coach. He found his own way, his own style, and it formed and transformed generations of Johnnie players. He re-interpreted the role.

Playing off this theme of re-interpreting roles, remembering that today is Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, take a moment, ponder this classic role:

What does a king (or a queen, royalty, or perhaps the president) look like? Act like?

How do they dress? What kind of power do they have and how do they use it?

How do they relate to the little guys? How do they die? And why?

(wealthy, powerful, in charge, superhuman-these come to mind.)

The context of today's gospel is an arraignment, Jesus is on trial and Pilate moves between Jesus' opponents, the religious leaders, and Jesus, trying to determine: guilty or not guilty.

It's a strange mix of church and state and power.

Pilate is supposedly in control, he's the prefect, the local representative of the Roman government, the greatest power of the time...

and he's trapped, afraid, terrified that he just may lose control of Jerusalem.

So back and forth they go: “Are you a king” Pilate asks over and over in a bunch of different ways. And Jesus answers, “**You say** that I am a king. For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

The irony of this unique reign, this radical kingship, is evident all through the years.

From the prophets who foretold his coming,

to Mary who sang of God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly.

From the magi who searched for baby Jesus while Herod fretted,

to his uncomfortable disciples as Jesus stooped to wash their feet in love not long before he died.

From that crown of thorns, *to the purple robe*, oh the list goes on.

Back and forth they go, some believing, others mocking, the leaders threatening, Pilate terrified,

A king or not a king, and if a king, clearly not the kind of king the world has ever seen before.

Jesus redefines, re-interprets what it means to be a king.

And he does it with the truth, not some heady truth that Pilate expects, but the truth revealed: dusty,

embodied, saving, healing, loving, forgiving, redeeming, the truth that Jesus lives and bids us follow.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, or as we call it Reign of Christ Sunday.

It was 1925 in Benito Mussolini’s Italy when Pope Pius the 11th instituted the feast of Christ the King.

Remember what was happening in that era? Between the wars. Fascism is at a height.

Why in that time, in that place, did the Pope create this new feast day that even we Protestants observe?

Why? To remind us, again, that our ultimate allegiance is to Christ, to a spiritual ruler, not to an earthly one.

Jesus re-defines, re-interprets what it means to be a king, to reign, that’s R-E-I-G-N, reign.

At this very end of the church year, when all is said and done, can we fathom the reign of Christ apart from our usual power structures? A reign that is distinctly counter-cultural?

I understand—as much as I can—the Pope’s motives years ago, why Christ the King.

But I am less sure we in this day, with this type of privilege, can really understand the fullness of what Jesus means when he says, *You can call me king, but I am going to be a completely different kind of ruler.*

With a new kind of ruler comes a new kind of community, with a new king comes a new of kingdom.

So where do we put our honor, our trust? And what does Christ’s reign look like?

These are our questions today and really everyday.

If you were following in the bulletin as I read the gospel, you may have noticed the words I changed.

Instead of reading king of the Jews, I said king of the Judeans.

Where it says something about Jesus being handed over to the Jews, I read instead handed over to the religious authorities.

The scholars are telling us this is a more accurate and honest way to read and understand these passages, especially John's Gospel, that for centuries has been used to propel Anti-Semitic fervor and violence, to disparage a whole community and people.

On Reign of Christ Sunday, we follow Jesus' lead and make space to re-interpret the parts of our traditions that have been used more for hate than for love—this is one step.

In the days after the shooting at Tree of Life in Pittsburg, across the country in San Francisco, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, like every other synagogue, wondered and worried about security.

Not only does their building have clearly Jewish images and lettering visible on its façade, they are also are a congregation founded by and for the LGBTQI community.

The President had mused, "if [Tree of Life] had an armed guard inside, they might have been able to stop [the gunman] immediately...they didn't have any protection."

In an article in J-Weekly, Rabbi Mychal Copeland described the congregation's discussions about security. This Jewish congregation shares their building with a Mennonite congregation.

While the Jewish community gathers on Friday and Saturday, the Mennonites worship on Sunday.

During those first weeks after the shooting, while the Jewish congregation prayed inside, the Mennonites kept a protective vigil of prayer and quiet songs outside.

Rabbi Mychal wrote of what a comfort their presence was, and then added, "I'll take 20 Mennonites over one armed guard any day."

Dear friends, as Jesus re-interprets his role, our communities are called to re-interpret not only our roles, but also our responses.

What a witness for those Mennonites to gather close, comforting, protecting.

What a witness for the people of Sha'ar Zahav to dwell in prayer trusting their neighbors.

What a witness for these communities together to *re-think* their security,

to respond not turning first to armed guards, but to their relationship, to their trust, to their values.

"I'll take 20 Mennonites over one armed guard any day."

This Reign of Christ Sunday, with all that is in our news, that's a powerful statement.

I've never met Johnnie Football Coach John Gagliardi, but from what I've read, I suspect that he was reflective about his style of coaching.

He knew he did it differently and kept at it... in his own style, his own way.

This morning we baptize a little one, a Beloved Child of God, Reagan Marcy Radziej.

In bringing Reagan for baptism, her folks trust Jesus' reign, his way.

So often we live our baptismal lives drawing near to God, pushing away, drawing near again.

But by the community's prayer,

by the Spirit's power, no matter what, we are held forever in Christ Jesus' big and gentle love.

By these waters, we are tethered to the One who shapes our lives for a new kind of following.

Together we are called into the counter-cultural ways of the One who is, the One who was, and the One who is to come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.