

Colossians 1:11-20
Creekside COB
November 14, 2004

“Not Your Ordinary, Average King”

Four years ago you made it possible for me visit the Taizé Community in France. Five days of the trip were spent in Paris. We took in some of the main attractions-- worshipping at Notre Dame, viewing history's greatest works of art at the Louve, and having our pictures taken beneath the Eiffel Tower. There was another site that left an impression on me. It was in view for only a couple of seconds as we sped down the city's main expressway. It was an impact mark on a concrete bridge support that was struck by the car in which Princess Diana was a passenger. Reflecting on the tragic accident that happened at that spot, it occurred to me that this was the closest I would ever come to royalty.

Americans know so little about royalty. We can't keep kings and queens, princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, and earls and earlettes straight. When our nation was founded, we decided it would not governed by a royal family. The role of England's royal family has diminished over the years. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles I have only ceremonial rule. When Americans are asked to define a king, we respond, "A male ruler." Ask the Brits and they answer, "The King is a monarch."

This is Christ the King Sunday-a day to reflect upon the nature of Christ's kingship and how utterly different it is from our notions of kingly authority. We associate the word "king" with images of palaces, thrones, crowns, robes, and scepters. But Jesus didn't live in a palace. "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests," he said, "but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Jesus didn't rule from a velvet upholstered throne, but instead a splintered, bloodstained cross. Jesus wore no gold-jeweled crown. He wore a crown of thorns shoved into his scalp. Jesus wore no luxuriously embroidered scarlet robe. He was

scourged and wore scarlet ribbons of flesh on his back. Jesus carried no scepter or sword because his authority and security was not in himself, but in God who sent him. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Appearances deceive. The headlines of the Jerusalem Times read: **ROMAN RULE AND RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY SCORE BIG WIN: JESUS LOSES WITHOUT A FIGHT.** Jesus "appeared" the victim. When King George VI died, the cry went throughout the land, "The King is dead, long live the Queen." The power of the monarchy passed from one person to another. Contrast this with the Christian cry that rings through history, "The king died, but was raised from the dead and he reigns forever and ever."

Appearances deceive. Jesus didn't look or act like a king. He didn't lift a finger to defend himself nor let others to do it for him. He chose to take the hatred dished out in the name of law and order and traditional religion, and repeated until his last breath, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." He wasn't an ordinary, average king. What they couldn't see at the time was that he was the kind of king they needed.

Flannery O'Connor was a celebrated Southern writer who died at the age of thirty-six. She was a Roman Catholic who wrote in an almost "severe" style about the prevalence of sin, grace, and redemption in our lives. In her book, Flannery introduces us to a woman named Mrs. Turpin. She sat in the waiting room at the doctor's office with her husband Claud, who was a "lean stringy old man." Across from her sat a woman with her sick child. Mrs. Turpin knew by looking that they were white trash. Another plain-looking woman sat with her large, homely daughter who was reading a book. She appeared to be about eighteen.

Mrs. Turpin always compared herself to others. She may not have been the most educated or privileged one in the room, but judging from appearances, she was clearly better. Lying in bed waiting for sleep to come, Mrs. Turpin sometimes wondered, "who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself." She thought how terrible it would be if the only choices

were "white trash" or "nigger." She assigned a level of status for everyone she met, and she was always one level above them.

In the waiting room, Mrs. Turpin was a chatterbox, trying to make conversation, talking down to the others, and assigning a level for each of them. The homely girl just glared at her. The "white trash" woman spoke up. "One thang I don't want is hogs. Nasty stinkin' thangs-a-gruntin; and a-rootin all over the place." Being a hog farmer along with Claud, Mrs. Turpin replies, "I'll have you know that our hogs aren't dirty and they don't stink! In fact, they're cleaner than some children I've seen," by implication, cleaner than the child sitting across from her. "We have a pig parlor." Even Mrs. Turpin's hogs were superior to the swine of others.

As she chattered, a religious song played on the waiting room radio. She agreed with the lyrics, thinking of herself as a very good person who always tries "to help anybody out that needed it... whether they be white or black, trash or decent." She noticed the homely girl staring at her. Referring to the book the girl was reading, she said, "You must be in college." Mrs. Turpin wanted to draw her out and perhaps teach her some manners. The girl didn't speak. Her mother answered for her. "Her name is Mary Grace." "Well, Mary Grace, it never hurt anyone to smile," said Mrs. Turpin. "It just makes you feel better all over. If its' one thing I am, its grateful. When I think of all I could have been besides myself,... I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!'"

Then, just as she inhaled for her next sentence, a book hits Mrs. Turpin above the eye, knocking her to the floor. The homely girl who threw it was restrained, but not before leaning over Mrs. Turpin and whispering in her ear, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Flannery O'Connor writes, "Mrs. Turpin, the once-large, self-assured woman, is reduced to a "hollow, empty drum." She felt herself falling into a strange, hellish place. After she was picked up and patched up by the doctor, Claud took her home down the dirt road toward their house.

That night, lying in bed and unable to sleep with a damp washcloth over her forehead, Mrs. Turpin repeats to herself, "I am NOT a wart hog from hell." But her denial had no force. The message could have justly been given to the others in the waiting room, but it was delivered to this respectable, hard-working, church-going woman by a nasty girl named Mary Grace.

The next day, Mrs. Turpin staggers down to the hog pen. Handing her the hose to clean the hogs, Claud says, "You look like you might have swallowed a mad dog." She stares at the hogs and hollers, "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell, too?" She didn't know it at the time, but she received a revelation from a book-throwing, ugly girl. It was her judgment day. Mrs. Turpin looked into the mirror and saw the truth about herself. She was a poorly constructed sham built over her put-downs of everyone else. She was worse than the "white trash" she detested. She was indeed a "wart hog from hell." Her constant need to reassure herself pointing to her terrible unworthiness.

Leaning on the hog parlor fence, peering into the growing dark, Mrs. Turpin desperately seeks relief from her misery. She stares at the hogs like they are an incarnation of knowledge that she needs. Then came a vision. She saw a great bridge spanning the vast gulf between heaven and earth with scores of souls marching into heaven. She saw whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives. She saw legions of people she called "niggers" in white robes. She saw battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And at the very end of the procession was a tribe she recognized immediately. It was comprised of people like Claud and herself. They marched with dignity, and as in everything, with good behavior. Their faces had a shocked expression that came from having all their virtues burned away.

Those good people who thought they had something had nothing. All they had was the graciousness of God who called them to heaven. All those who had been several rungs beneath Mrs. Turpin were at the head of the line. Without a virtue to their

name, Mrs. Turpin and Claud saw themselves dancing at the end of the procession.

Getting hit in the head with a book was an awakening. O'Connor called it her "revelation." Mrs. Turpin saw herself as she was, not as she thought she was.

We are all, more or less, her relatives. Who hasn't thought, "I'm no Mother Theresa, but at least I'm a better than most of the low-lives I see." Knowing what we do about other people, we take comfort that we don't do what THEY do. All in all, we're ordinary, average, decent people looking to pick up "extra credit" points along the way. We belong to that moral majority that made itself heard on Election Day. "Thank you Jesus for making everything the way it is."

Listen again to Paul's portrait of the King:

He delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities. All things were created through him and for him. In him all things hold together.

For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, to reconcile to himself all things... making peace by the blood of his cross.

Let me take back something I said at the beginning of the sermon. The closest I've been to royalty was not the site of Princess Di's fatal accident. We are in the presence of royalty every day of our lives. The King is enthroned above us, nailed to his cross that acts as a mirror in which we see ourselves as we are-wart hogs from hell.

But if we are willing to face the ugly honesty about ourselves, and trust that the King's desire isn't to lock us up in a dark

dungeon, or banish us to a desolate island, or heed the rantings of the Queen of Hearts who shouts, "OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!", then we can give thanks with grateful hearts.

The VICTIM is the VICTOR. The clown on the cross is the KING who is so determined to love wart hogs that he give us his grace to save us.

So what shall we do? Like the battalions on the bridge to heaven, we can shout and clap and leap like frogs and sing:

**Crown him the Lord of life, who triumphed o'er the grave
Rose victorious in the strife for those he came to save.
His glories now we sing who died, and rose on high,
Who died, eternal life to bring, and lives that death may die.**

**Crown him the Lord of love; behold his hands and side.
Rich wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified.
No angels in the sky can fully bear the sight,
But downward bend their burning eyes at mysteries so bright.**

Long live the King!