

“Disciples Give Ultimate Allegiance to Christ” – Colossians 1:11-20 – November 22, 2019

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Before we get too deep into this message, I pose a question to you – on your last trip around or out of town, how many orange cars did you see? Think about that question and see if you can remember seeing any orange cars.

On this Christ the King, or Reign of Christ Sunday, we acknowledge the lordship of Christ in our life. I say that as if it were a given. And most of us have claimed that at some point or another during our lives, perhaps multiple times. If you’re a member of this church or have been a member of any church, you have affirmed that Jesus Christ is your Lord. If you have been ordained as deacon or elder, if you have been confirmed, you have made that assertion. Christ is your Lord.

When Paul wrote his letter to the church at Colossae, it was during a time when people believed that life circumstances were determined by any number of unseen spirits and gods exerting their wills on humanity. We would call it a pagan time. The people believed that these unseen spirits required their obedience in order for the people to remain healthy and to prosper. Additionally, there were any number of philosophical ideas floating around – with specific beliefs and values.

As these early converts learned about Jesus Christ, they probably wondered where he fit in to this panoply of spiritual forces and guides. This was a new philosophy among so many others. But as Paul is writing to and instructing this small band of believers, he is faced with having to shift their understandings of what they believed about spirituality and philosophy. The belief in Christ wasn’t just one choice out of many competing dogmas flying around. Instead, Paul had to teach them that in the face of all other systems of belief, Christ was the ultimate, the pinnacle – the center of all meaning and all life. Everything else faded in comparison.

In some ways, total allegiance to Christ seems almost easier when the belief in his lordship is not the dominant one available. Because in order to follow Christ, there would need to be a complete overhaul of one’s understanding and doing of all of life. Following him would be more of an all or nothing type of belief system, life-changing. Because his teachings were counter-cultural. They stood in stark contrast to the normal way of life, where financial and political power were the ways to get ahead in life.

The understanding of Christianity and living a Christian life in the U.S. has been watered down. Perhaps that’s even an understatement. I remember back when I was a kid in elementary school in Indiana. It was the beginning of the school year, and I was filling out an information form. One of the questions on it was, what is your religion? – and back then, I

think the choices were Christian Catholic or Protestant, Jewish, or other. And I didn't really know what we were, so I asked my parents. They told me to choose Christian Protestant. I didn't know what that meant. We didn't go to church, and I had only the vaguest idea of who Jesus was.

To be a Christian in the US is almost synonymous with being born here. At some point, I recognized the hypocrisy of choosing Christian Protestant, so I didn't choose anything. I guess I was one of the first "nones."

And that's what I mean when I say that following Christ is much harder for us here in the U.S., because what it means to be a Christian has become so watered-down and so distorted from Christ's teachings, that it has become irrelevant. If it's just a matter of checking a box on an information form, what's the point?

And while we may think that we are much more sophisticated than the early church, because we don't believe in or fear a bunch of spirits and demigods floating around tormenting us, we have become subject to and afraid of a different set of powers. Kathryn Matthews wrote, "There is good reason to fear the power of greed, and war, and violence, and addiction, and commercialism, as well as the philosophies, values, and beliefs that shape our way of life today, like an exaggerated individualism, excessive materialism, and an unfounded trust in military might for our security." We don't have to look very far around to see the negative impact that these powers have had on our world, and we do fear for the future of our children and grandchildren. (https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_november_24_2019)

In the passage from Colossians, the writer calms our fears by illustrating that we can see God's plan for this world, for creation, for all of us, in Jesus Christ. That ultimately the power of sin and suffering, the power of brokenness can be and has been overthrown by Christ. The words the writer uses are poetic, perhaps even an early hymn. Sometimes it takes poetry and metaphor to describe how Christ is over everything. It's hard to imagine this literally. This language helps us to imagine the unimaginable. It reminds us that what is yet unseen, is ever before us, if we can only but catch glimpses of it as God's realm breaks through into this world.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, we are reminded that the tiny baby who was born into meager circumstances, grew up and preached and taught a new way of living. A way of life that was counter-cultural enough that the authorities were afraid of his influence, so he was crucified as a criminal. His resurrection gives us hope that his message cannot be silenced, and that God's promised redemption is here and now. Our world hurtles through time and space, while the sin and suffering that we experience fall away piece by piece, as God's holy realm breaks through.

Our challenge is to see through the common, distorted understanding of Christianity that is present and all too dominant in our culture. And we are to seek and embrace Christ's true call to turn away from the powers that dominate this world, to live in a way that goes against everything our society holds onto. That greed and power seek only to destroy. Only the love of Christ can heal the brokenness of this world and of ourselves.

So back to the orange cars. How many orange cars do you remember seeing on your last trip out and about? Probably zero, maybe one. Next time you go out, look for them. You'll see them, because they are there. And once you start intentionally looking for them, you'll wonder why you didn't see them before. (<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5396>)

And here's the thing – the power of Christ – the power of one crucified – the power of one who stands against the powers of this world, is there. But like the orange cars, we don't see it unless we are looking for it. So, let's open our eyes. And when we do, we will see the power of Christ at work all around us – whenever the voiceless are heard, and the oppressed are freed, the hungry given food – each of these points of Christ's light in a darkened world remind us of Christ's work and our calling to follow him on this counter-cultural journey he has set before us.