

Christ the King Sunday Year A November 22, 2020 **King of Surprise, King of Hope**
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

One of my favorite movies of all time is the 1977 movie *Oh, God!*. Based on the novel with the same title published in 1971, *Oh, God!* is the story of a man named Jerry Lambert. There is nothing extraordinary about Jerry. He is the quintessential twentieth century every man, married with two children, living in a house in a suburb in California where he works as an assistant manager of a grocery store. The opening credits of the movie show us Jerry is a good assistant manager, he pays attention to his customers and employees; he is a good father, spending time with his children after working all day; he is a good husband by giving affection to his wife and listening to her. In fact, those opening credits are pretty boring by today's standards. There is no tension, no conflict, no drama, no unhappiness, no existential crisis in progress. Just a guy contentedly living his life.

His calm life is interrupted when Jerry gets a letter in the mail inviting him to an interview. The interview happens to be with God, who incidentally spelled the word 'interview' incorrectly in the invitation. At first Jerry dismissed it as a scam, but curiosity got the better of him and he decided to check it out and went to the meeting with God.

The rest of the movie is the wonderful, funny, and sometimes sad story of Jerry's journey of learning to listen to God, to trust God, and share the message God wants him to share with the world that we all can do better at caring for the world and each other. Life can work, God said, we don't have to cause the suffering so many people experience, if we all work together and love and cherish and nurture each other.

Eventually, some religious professionals get wind of Jerry's attempts to spread God's message of love and meet with him, as they doubt a common man like him, one who isn't even religious, could be God's chosen messenger. This leads to Jerry sitting in a court of law, on trial for causing damage to the reputation of an evangelical leader.

When it is time for Jerry to testify, he was asked to describe how God visited him most recently. Jerry replied by saying, “As a bellboy”. Because in fact God had knocked on Jerry’s hotel door dressed as a bellboy or bell hop, one of the hotel employees who helps carry the suitcases and delivers room service to guests. After Jerry answered the question, everyone in the courtroom laughed because they couldn’t believe that God, the Almighty, Lord of lords and King of kings would appear in such a lowly, common way.

Throughout the movie, however, that is precisely how God was presented. Portrayed by actor and comedian George Burns, God appeared as an elderly man dressed to go fishing, a maintenance worker in a park picking up trash, a taxi driver, and for a brief moment God even appeared as an African American woman shopping for cereal at the grocery store. God wasn’t a booming voice in the sky, an angry thunder, an attractive man dressed in white, or a wealthy businessman. God appeared to Jerry and those of us watching the movie as someone who looks like God could be any one of us, most of the time as someone who serves others, who cares for the earth and those on it, who is so unassuming anyone of us could walk past and never notice they had been so very close to God.

While *Oh, God!* is a movie whose primary purpose is to entertain, its depiction of God fits with Jesus’ parable from today’s Gospel because it overturns or reverses our preconceptions about what it means for Jesus to be king and the social codes we accept with very little question.

The parable we read from Matthew’s Gospel is often called “The parable of the sheep and the goats” because it features Jesus separating the nations into two groups. The trouble with labeling the parable this way is that it becomes tempting to start judging people and deciding if they are sheep or goats. And there is enough division in the world right now. Or that label might make us try to identify who Jesus was talking about when he said, “the least of these” so we can run out and find ways to distribute charity to such folks thus securing our own position as one of the people on the side of righteousness. But this behavior isn’t what the parable is about, in fact that seems to be what Jesus didn’t want those of us listening to do.

Make no mistake, this is a story about judgment, especially the final judgment when Jesus returns in his glory to judge the living and the dead, as we say in our prayers. But when we try and take that role of judge away from Jesus by doing it ourselves, we make ourselves judge and ruler instead of Jesus and end up missing how this parable is really describing the reversal of the power structures we are so very painfully familiar with and accepting of, despite the harm they can cause.

Notice in the parable Jesus did not describe the second coming with its glory and angels as being covered in gold, wearing expensive suits, and arriving in shiny black ridiculously expensive vehicles. He didn't describe his throne as jewel encrusted, made of the finest Moroccan leather, with lumbar support, heating, massaging and reclining functions, or any of the features we associate with comfort, prestige, power, or authority. In fact, he didn't describe what that glory would look like except in the act of final judgment.

There was something significant to that final judgment that wasn't dividing the nations into two groups. That something significant was the element of surprise. Specifically, the surprise expressed by all the people no matter what side they were put on. What surprised them seemed to be how they were judged. If we look closely, they weren't judged simply by whether or not they did good works, by how they voted, or how much charity they gave, where they shop, but by living lives marked by compassion and mercy where they didn't judge who was worthy of compassion. And when the people in the parable asked for clarification on Jesus' judgment, the response they got was, "as you did to the least of these, so you did to me."

As I said before, this isn't an invitation to think about who the "least" is, it is the part of the parable that takes us back to the court room scene in the movie *Oh, God!* where Jerry Landers was laughed at when he said God appeared to him as an elderly man dressed in a hotel bellboy's uniform delivering ketchup for his meal. The people in the court room couldn't believe God would appear as a minimum wage employee, like so many minimum wage employees we all encounter every day. The people who prepare or serve us food, or stock the shelves in stores, or retrieve the

items we just ordered on-line to get packed and shipped to our homes. And yet, that is who God chose to identify with. Just like in the parable, where Jesus said that is where he had been dwelling.

What this parable is implying is that for the people who see each and every human being as a beloved child of God, no matter their status, Jesus has already come again, and is dwelling with us. The glory of Jesus isn't gold or wealth or comfort; it is the delight and love people show when they embody the love of God in Christ. The glory of Jesus is however and whenever the love of God in Christ manifests or incarnates in our lives.

This is an important reminder because today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the Church Year, and it is our practice as followers of Jesus to end the year reflecting on what it means that Jesus is King. The word 'king' suggests images of wealth, prestige, power, perhaps dictators, or royal families who feast on the best of foods wearing the finest of clothing while their people suffer poverty and illness. But Jesus, as he shows us time and time again, is not that kind of a king. That is what today's parable is about. Jesus is the kind of king who glories in God's love not our concepts of power. Jesus is the kind of king who will eventually and in some ways is already reversing the judgments we humans make about who has value, who deserves wealth, comfort, power, and who does not. Today we remember that the kings we most often revere, the kings of industry, the kings of celebrity, the kings of politics, the kings of commerce, the kings of institutions, the kings of consumerism, capitalism, and supremacy, are also the kings who contribute to the injustices that cause harm to so many. Jesus is the king who will overturn the injustices that cause so much suffering in ways that will surprise us all. Which means we don't have to participate in those systems, we can choose another way, one that reflects who our king is, one that reflects the love of God in Christ by what we do and what we say. We can choose to wear a mask in public not because of government mandates but because we care for the health and well-being of all people not only during a pandemic, but all the time. We can sacrifice a little bit of comfort or convenience or even some of our traditions this year because we understand how our lives are interconnected with the lives of all our neighbors, even the ones we don't like. Such sacrifice is an act of love that embodies Christ. Of course, not everyone will see things that way.

At the end of the movie *Oh, God!*, Jerry didn't change the world for the better, but neither did he fail. He lost much of what made his life so happy when he lost his job and his privacy. But his relationships with his family were deeper, as was his relationship with God, who spoke and appeared to Jerry as someone who loves him and loves the world. And this deepening of relationships opened Jerry's heart and gave him hope. This love is the glory of God in Christ, who is our King, who is with us right now, perhaps manifesting in ways that will surprise us and give hope.