

There is a legend in the land where I come from about an insult that was transformed into an iconic symbol of pride, joy, and celebration. Back in the mid 1980's in Wisconsin, where I was born and raised, a word was coined by the people living in the state directly to the south, the state of Illinois, that was intended to be an insult to the people of Wisconsin. The word is *cheesehead*. It is by the way one word, no matter what autocorrect insists. Originally it was intended to be a slur against Wisconsin's dairy industry, which the state is known for. The word was used as an insult any place people from Wisconsin and Illinois mixed, especially sporting events like professional baseball and football games.

Wisconsinites don't take such insults lightly, as they like to think of themselves as hardworking, blue collar, salt of the earth people who support their families, their teams, and their state. However, Wisconsinites also don't take themselves too seriously. They know how to laugh at themselves, they tend to have a hearty sense of humor.

This combination of a good sense of humor and humbleness came together in 1987 when a man named Ralf Bruno was helping his mother reupholster her davenport – that's what Wisconsinites call couches – in her home in Milwaukee. When he took the couch apart, he thought the foam inside the cushions resembled cheese. Being a creative person, he took some of that foam, cut it into a triangle, burned holes into it, spray painted it yellow and turned it into a hat.... the first cheesehead hat. He wore it to a Milwaukee Brewers baseball game where the Brewers were playing the Chicago White Sox. At first his friends weren't sure they wanted to be seen with him, but after some other Brewers fans approached Ralf and asked if they could wear his cheesehead hat, his friends and the meaning of the word cheesehead changed forever.

A week later Ralf returned to County Stadium with a bag full of cheesehead hats he had made to sell. The rest, the legend goes, is history. The cheesehead hats became so popular Ralf eventually opened a business called Foamation, Inc. Although the company has expanded, their number one selling item to this day remains the cheesehead hat, and the company is still proudly based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Today, the cheesehead has become a cultural icon recognizable all around the world. It is even believed to be the design the cheese emoji is based on. People still wear them with joyful pride at Green Bay Packer football games and Milwaukee Brewer baseball games. They also pop up in movies and TV shows. When someone refers to a cheesehead, it is no longer a derogatory term, it is a nod to a people who love their state, their sport teams, their families, and have turned self-deprecating humor into a fun symbol of pride and joy.

The legend of the cheesehead is a fun one, a happy story that at first glance doesn't seem to fit with today's celebration of Christ the King Sunday, but there is within it a kernel of truth that fits with today's celebration quite well.

Christ the King is the final celebration of the church year, the last Sunday on the Church's calendar. The church year ends by reminding us the Jesus we follow is not just a teacher of wisdom, a storyteller, a miracle worker and healer. He is the Son of God, he is God's love incarnate in the earthy stuff of humanity who restores us to right relationship with God.

One way the church articulates this belief is by calling Jesus our king. But when we call Jesus king, we don't mean someone like Henry the VIII or Elvis, or whoever you think of when you think of a king. Throughout history, most kings, whether they were rulers of countries or music charts, used their power to help themselves first and their people second, or third, or much farther down the line. When we use the word king to refer to Jesus, we do so like Wisconsinites use the word cheesehead, by appropriating it, reclaiming it, redefining it from its intended definition to the one we have for it.

Just like our Gospel today. At first glance, Jesus' crucifixion might seem an inappropriate choice for Christ the King Sunday. Here we find the most humiliating, painful, despairing moment of Jesus' life. When the Roman soldiers called him a king, they weren't showing respect, they were taunting and jeering him. On the cross Jesus seems powerless, not powerful. Yet the author of the Gospel would beg to differ. To them, Jesus' vulnerability is his power, not a weakness. His strength is to do God's will, to love as God loves, even when people called him cruel names, tortured, and killed him. It is on the cross where the author of the Gospel wants us to recognize Jesus is our king precisely because he is not like any other ruler, which means following him is not like following any other ruler.

When we say Jesus is our king, it means it is Jesus who we submit to; he is our example, our savior, and moral compass. That doesn't mean we don't follow the rules of government or society, of course we follow those rules. Jesus as our king means we let Jesus influence how we follow the rules, doing so in ways that shows care for each other, forgiveness, generosity, even paying it forward.

Jesus as king also has a deeper meaning. Two years ago, generous parishioners gave us an icon of Christ the King by iconographer and friend of our parish Kelly Latimore. When he presented the icon, Kelly explained it by reminding us Christ is enthroned in God's Kingdom of Heaven, which means creation is incarnate in Jesus just like God is incarnate in him. Because of Jesus' embodiment of both the divine and the earthly, there is no person nor any living thing that does not demand our respect.

This is why when it came time to put the icon in the church, we thought and prayed about the best place to put it. To honor what the icon represents, we chose to hang it over the doorway between the narthex and nave. (The nave is where everyone except the choir and servers are sit during a service. The narthex is the space you enter when you come in through the big red doors.) The icon is there so that we all walk beneath it when we come into church to worship to remind us we aren't worshipping ourselves, we are worshipping God. The icon is also there to remind us as we leave the church and go back into the world - to our families, neighbors, communities, work, school - that we remember to look for the divine wherever we go. For God is at work in the world, transforming and healing, turning harm into salvation, breaching the gaps caused by prejudice, even if it is the kind of on-going prejudice between states by turning an insult into an icon. The Christ the King icon also reminds us, wherever we go to respect all living things as our King would have us do.

If you are reading this sermon, I urge you to look at the picture of the icon and spend some time with it in prayer. And when you go out your door, I hope you remember by your words and actions you can be an icon by showing the world the pride and joy of the love of our king.