

September 18, 2022  
Lectionary 25, Year C  
1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Psalm 113  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
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### Equals

I feel like I owe you a sermon. Because I just read a very complicated gospel reading and now, I have to admit, I'm not going to preach on it.

The parable I just read and Jesus' puzzling commentary on it is something that has challenged pastors, preachers, bible scholars, and the people in the pews for centuries, maybe for millennia. I recently passed my twentieth anniversary of ordination, which means that I have had the opportunity to preach on this text approximately six times, as it has come around in our three-year Sunday lectionary, our three-year list of readings for Sunday worship. I have made six good faith efforts to make this strange parable and Jesus' words about it make sense in our context, and I probably need a seventh chance to grapple with this parable and what surrounds it.

In reading about this parable this week, someone I read said this about this parable and about parables in general. "Preaching on the parables is like trying to explain a joke. You either get it or you don't."

Well, for this parable, most people, myself included, don't get it. We can try, we can wrestle, we can imagine, we can try to put it into historical context, but sometimes, even after all of that, we're still not sure that we get it, still not sure we get the point, get the meaning, even get the joke, because a lot of Jesus' parables are actually intended to be funny, to get people to laugh at the strange and surprising behavior of the people in the parable and the extraordinary idea that God is like that too.

Sometimes we miss the joke, miss the point of the story because we get tangled up in the holiness of it all, the holiness of Jesus' words and we forget that he was talking to real, regular people, and he wanted them to understand. In a culture that was very different from ours in many ways, sometimes what would have been clear and even funny sounds strange and mysterious to our ears. It's worth it to try to figure all of that out, to unpack that, but I'm not going to do that today. So, I'll have to owe you one, a sermon on this text. Maybe even a bible study on the text, so that we can understand, or at least imagine that we understand, and maybe even hear the joke.

But, for today's sermon, something else struck me in our readings, something that felt timely. I've been doing some visiting this week to some of folks who have trouble getting out as much as they once did, and there's been one common theme to all of our visits, besides communion. They all have been watching the coverage of the Queen's death and all of the rites and pomp and circumstance that has surrounded the lead up to her funeral. And while I haven't had time to watch the television coverage of these events, I will admit that I've read at least one article about the queen and her funeral preparations a day since she died and her death also reminded me that I never finished watching Netflix's series, The Crown, so I picked it back up and have watched a few more episodes.

I wouldn't call myself someone who has been super interested in the Britain's royal family over the years. In fact, I think the obsessive interest in the royal family, the fact that they can hardly go anywhere or do anything without being harassed by photographers, the fact that their every move, every clothing choice, every relationship, and every facial expression is put

under a microscope, analyzed, examined, obsessed over, seems pretty invasive to me. It feels like if there's a slow news day, then certain magazines will splash a link to an article hinting that there's some kind of interpersonal drama between members of the royal family, true or not, across their websites, or twitter feeds, and boom, problem solved, people are reading again. It all feels kind of gossipy to me, as well as largely made up. But the Queen's death has caused me to tune in a bit more. After all, she's definitely dead. That's not a rumor or a tabloid invention. And against that backdrop, with all of that on my mind, earlier this week, I read these words from today's second reading from 1 Timothy;

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

These words, written by the apostle Paul or by someone who wrote in his name and who continued his ministry after his death, take royalty for granted, as a given. It was the common experience of everyone in the Roman Empire that they lived under the rule of an emperor and that all who were in civic authority over them ruled as an extension of that emperor. It was also part of the culture of the Roman empire in which the early church found itself and grew that the emperor was to be worshiped, like a god. The cult of emperor worship was one of the ways in which all people of the Roman empire were supposed to be bound together. They might have their own languages, they might have their own holidays, they might have their own

gods, but once the Pax Romana had come to them, they were expected to make sacrifices to the emperor. They were expected to pray to the emperor. They were expected to bow down when the image of the emperor was paraded before them for holidays and festivals, to bow down to the emperor as they would to a god. Emperor worship was part of doing business, part of engaging in civic life, part of being a good Roman citizen, a good participant in Roman society.

For most in the Roman Empire, for most of the conquered peoples who made up sprawling and diverse empire, it was not a problem just to add the emperor as one god among the many that made up often sprawling pantheons of the gods that people worshiped.

But for Christians, and for those of their parent religion, Judaism, it was a huge problem. They couldn't do it. They couldn't do it without breaking the first commandment, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3)

So, they were labeled, difficult, uncooperative, unpatriotic, even treasonous. Much of the time, while the worshipers, of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Christians and Jews alike, lived somewhat on the outskirts of society because of their refusal to participate in emperor worship, or pagan worship of any kind, they were left alone, left out, but left alone, because of their strange peculiarity, what was seen as their choice not to go with the flow and worship the emperor along with, alongside their God.

But if someone wanted to cause trouble for a Christian or a Jew, for any reason, they certainly had a way to do it. All they had to do was bring the person up on charges of blasphemy or treason and when that happened

the officials would require one thing of the accused at their trial. They would have to make a sacrifice to the emperor and bow down before his image. A small thing, and if they would do it, they would go free. If they wouldn't do it, they could be imprisoned, their property could be forfeited, they could even be killed.

So, some did it. Some made the sacrifices. Some bowed down. The stakes were too high, the risks were too great. But some didn't and faced the consequences.

It was into that kind of world that the advice in 1 Timothy was given to the church, that prayers be offered for kings, emperors, and all in high positions. They were advised to pray for their leaders, to make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for their leaders, though not to them, never to them, with the hoped-for result that those who prayed for their leaders might live a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

I imagine that since the day of her death, September 8<sup>th</sup>, many prayers have been said for Queen Elizabeth, for her family, for her successor, King Charles, for her nation, for the commonwealth.

But of course, if you've been following it all, you know that with the queen's death the questions have been raised, does Britain need a royal family at all? Do the nations that claim the British monarch as their head of state need to continue that relationship, that sense of connection. The Queen's death has raised the issue of imperialism and the historic harm that has been done to conquered nations, harm that continues to be felt long after independence has been gained.

As a person whose own country has a grappling, a reckoning to be done with its own history, I'm glad that the status of the monarchy is not my

problem, I'm glad that I don't get a vote, I'm glad that it's not a decision that I have to make, that it's not something that I have to figure out. After all, people in the United States made the decision about where we stood vis a vis a monarchy almost 250 years ago.

But here's one more word from today's scripture readings that relate to royalty and rulers. It's from today's Psalm and it's a reminder for us, who might be inclined to get caught up in the pomp and ceremony of all things royal this week. It's a reminder for those of us who might be celebrating that no one is in charge of us, no one rules over us, individually or collectively.

Today's Psalm tells us this: While we may not have an earthly king or queen, while we may not want an earthly king or queen, we have a heavenly ruler, a heavenly Lord, who is enthroned on high, who is above all nations, who is glorious beyond any earthly glory and beyond all heavenly glory. And this glorious ruler, stoops to behold us, and stoops to be with us, this ruler, this glorious one, is Emmanuel, God with us. And with this God with us, comes equality, God stoops, not to converse, not to guide, not to instruct the mighty of the earth, those who have earthly power or wealth or position or fame, but to lift up the lowly, to lift up the poor, God stoops with compassion for those who have been beaten down by life and enthrones them, God who is greater than all, creates equality between the weakest and the greatest of the earth, between those who have little and those who have much.

So, when we're making our prayers for those who are great among us, the leaders and rulers of the world, we should pray that their exercise of their power brings peace to all people, brings dignity to all, as God has said through today's scriptures that the ultimate goal of God's action is life, dignity, peace, and equality, for all, those who are weak, those who are poor, those who

are vulnerable, that they be lifted up, from their despair, from their suffering, from their poverty, for we are all one, all equal, under our glorious, sovereign God. Amen.