

ABOVE EVERY NAME THAT IS NAMED
Ephesians 1:15-23

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Reign of Christ Sunday, November 26, 2017, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Let us pray: *Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; come kindle the flame of sacred love, in these thankful hearts of ours. Amen.*

I spent the day Friday driving from Cleveland to Alexandria, leaving about 6:30 a.m. so as to get back here to see a couple of people in the hospital and to replace the Comcast modem that had rendered Wi-Fi virtually inoperable at home shortly before we had made the drive to Cleveland on Wednesday afternoon. We had journeyed there to visit my wife's family, as we often do, and, as some of her children were not able to arrive until Friday night, she is flying home today. Hence I was alone on my drive home.

The six hour drive gave me time to think and to catch up on some of what goes on at Westminster.

- I listened to all three podcasts of Bruce Douglass's lectures in Adult Education on the history of the Reformation, the fourth of which was this morning.
- I listened to recent sermons by Whitney and Patrick, and, for a dose of humility, to one of my own as well, something I will only do in the absolute privacy of the car!
- And I listened to the recent Adult Ed presentation of our now seventeen years' ministry in taking the lead with other churches in building and supporting the United Orphanage and Academy in Moi's Bridge, Kenya.

Part of my thoughts were geared to what I would say today on Christ the King – or Reign of Christ – Sunday. It is a day which marks the end of one liturgical year and distinguishes the *nature* of Christ's rule on earth from that of political rule under which we all live, whether we are in a republican form of government such as our own or a reign of tyranny (apparently ending) after thirty-seven years in Zimbabwe.

The Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* says:

The festival of Christ the King...ends our marking of Ordinary Time...and moves us to the threshold of Advent, the season of hope for Christ's coming again at the end of time.

The day centers on the crucified and risen Christ, whom God exalted to rule over the *whole* universe....Christ reigns supreme. Christ's truth judges falsehood. As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people. In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled. In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil.¹

I.

Driving back from a peaceful Thanksgiving, in which, surprisingly, national political divisions didn't make much of a appearance at the table, I was nonetheless aware of efforts various people have been making to bring a measure of civility, if not peace, to our national discussion.

On Tuesday, two organizations with which I am familiar collaborated to release a series of videos in which seventeen members of Congress expressed their views on what holds us together as a nation.

One said: "We can debate, and we can feel strongly about our differences, but what we have in common is so much stronger, so much broader, and we need to keep remembering that."

Another – Representative Steve Scalise, who was shot on the ball field in Alexandria earlier this year – added: "I personally have a lot to be thankful for this Thanksgiving, but we all do."²

The appeal to our common heritage is one way of recovering our national civility.

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Another voice urging a unity deeper than our current headlines comes from a figure to whom I have found myself returning to listen in the divisiveness of recent years. In Monday's *Post*, Garrison Keillor wrote:

It's a great country. Take a train sometime and see for yourself. We are not at war [at least within our own shores]. The economy is worrisome but it always has been...Longevity is getting longer. People read books, more than ever. They still know the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"...

It helps to get old so you gain some perspective on life [he adds]. I was lucky to come along when open-heart surgery was available and there were blood thinners to reduce the risk of strokes. If I had been born in 1880, I'd be dead now. I did my best to die young ... but common sense kicked in and, praise the Lord, I burned the smokes and poured the whiskey in the sink.

...

I married well. It took several tries but I made it. She is sharp and on top of things...She is lively and witty... And she is in love with me and has forgiven my excesses.³

It is the perspective of age and history – about himself and about our nation – that leaves Keillor thankful this holiday.

¹ PCUSA, *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Geneva: 1993), 151. Available at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/christ-king-reign-christ/>.

² "Steve Scalise, Steny Hoyer and 15 Other Lawmakers Want To Help You Have A Civil Thanksgiving Dinner," *The Washington Post* 11/21/17.

³ Garrison Keillor, "It's Thanksgiving. Be Happy," *The Washington Post* 11/20/17.

II.

While I for one do not think our nation is as divided as we were during the Civil War, nor as divided as we were during the spring and summer of 1968, we have in recent years come to experience one of the more divided times in our history. Unlike in prior times, our divisions today rear their voice and face every minute we are in the presence of screens posted in work places, gyms, department stores, and mobile devices carried in our pockets and purses. Thus, while our divisions may not yet be as far reaching as prior ones, they are more omnipresent to us, and they take a psychic toll on us all, peaceful Thanksgiving or not.

As I listened to my own sermon driving home, I realize that in the past couple of years, in the midst of our national divisiveness, I have been trying to emphasize two things at the heart of the Christian faith:

- The teaching that every human being is created in the image of God and is therefore a child of God
- And the teaching that the steadfast love of the Lord is given to every human being.

The essayist Marilynne Robinson recently quoted a seventeenth century Puritan preacher on the first point:

...the soul of the poorest child is of equal dignity with the soul of Adam... [this minister said].

It is a most astonishing mystery [the minister continued] to see heaven and earth married together in one person; the dust of the ground, and an immortal spirit clasping each other with such dear embraces and tender love... how little affinity, and yet what dear affection is found betwixt them!⁴

It is difficult to cast our fellow human beings aside – or denigrate them – if we see the “dear affection” found between body and soul that constitutes who they are, who we are, who every human being is.

...the soul of the poorest child is of equal dignity with the soul of Adam...

Likewise, in the sermon I preached two weeks ago, I ended with the final line of Psalm 107:

*Let those who are wise give heed to these things,
and consider the steadfast love of the Lord.*

The *sacredness* of each soul, the *steadfast love* of the Lord for each human being, are positive counter forces to the divisiveness of our day.

III.

But our text for this Reign of Christ Sunday exceeds in emphasis even these two hallmarks of Christian teaching. In emphasizing human unity, today’s text points to something else: God’s ultimate power which stands above us all.

Written by either Paul as a statement of his mature thought, or a disciple of Paul’s who wrote Ephesians to honor Paul and reflect his thought, the passage affirms the ultimate triumph of the power of God at the end of time and the reality of that power in the present. It speaks of:

⁴ Quoted in Marilynne Robinson, “Old Souls, New World,” *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* Spring/Summer 2017, available at <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/springsummer2017/old-souls-new-world>.

...the immeasurable greatness of his *power* for us who believe, according to the working of his *great power*.

God put this *power* to work in Christ when [God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all *rule* and *authority* and *power* and *dominion*, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

This passage focuses less on the *love* of God or the value of each human *soul* as it focuses on the *power* of God – made known in the resurrection and ascension of Christ. It speaks of

- The immeasurable *greatness* of God's power
- The working of God's *great power*
- God's putting this *power* to work in Christ when he raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him – at the ascension – at his right hand in the heavenly places.

And the writer then makes the bold claim that Christ's divine power is "far above" – note *far* above – "all rule and authority and power and dominion" that we know on earth.

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For some reason I remember when Robert Mugabe came to power in Zimbabwe in 1980. I have a vague memory that a fellow student in seminary was the brother of a Methodist Bishop who briefly and unsuccessfully preceded Mugabe in the Presidency. Since then, I have always known the name and been vaguely aware of the cruelty of his regime. Despite that cruelty, and cruelty of others like him, I still believe that God's power is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion we know on earth." As the Book of Worship says: "In the end, Christ will triumph over the forces of evil."

IV.

Paul or his disciple also adds an additional key phrase describing Christ's power: "above every name that is named." In raising Christ from the dead (resurrection) and seating Christ at the right hand of God (ascension), God has lifted God's self – Father, Son, and Spirit – above "every name that is named."

- Above the name of our most despicable earthly rulers.
- Above the name of our most venerated earthly leaders.
- Above the name of those who abuse their office and violate people who work *for* or are *near* them.
- Above the name of those who muster the courage to come forward and name those who have abused them.

Christ's name is:

- Above the name of our political party or the political party of the person seated across the table at Thanksgiving.

Christ's name is:

- Above the name of our most fervent understanding of what our nation should stand for, be, and do;
- And above the name of our most fervent understanding of what our nation should *not* stand for, *not* be, and *not* do.

Above every name that is named.

V.

Finally, the writer adds: "Not only in this age but in the age to come." If we stop and think about this phrase, it an odd word order. Given our propensity to be more hopeful about "the age to come" rather than "the present age," we might expect the writer to extol the power of Christ "not only in the age to come but [also] in this age." But this writer is so confident of God's power *in this age* that he wants to remind his readers that God's power continues *in the age to come* as well. Unlike them, we need to be reminded that God's power prevails not only in the age to come but *in this flesh and blood age* in which we live as well.

VI.

The reason we go to Cleveland at holidays is that my wife's mother moved there to live with her son and his family when we married eleven years ago. Her mother is 97 years old. Her mind is sharp but she needs help getting up out of the chair. Her son, who is in his late sixties and retired, sleeps in her room nights when she has trouble breathing, often sitting on her bed, holding her hand so that she does not panic.

When it came time for me to tell her goodbye, though she was standing at her walker, she could not lift her head to speak because the neck muscles were simply not strong enough at the end of the day. I squatted down so we could say goodbye eye to eye, because the unspoken reality is that every goodbye following a visit may turn out to be the final goodbye.

This family has never shied away from following or talking about politics. They are large and cover several generations, and they have branches on the West Coast and East Coast and in the Midwest. They include several members of mixed racial heritage; they occupy different strata of our society; they reflect the deepest divisions in our country today.

Last Thanksgiving, immediately after the election, the discussions were heated. But while politics came up this Thanksgiving, the heat was considerably less, though new protagonists and reinforcements were scheduled to arrive after I left.

Perhaps the mood was more civil out of respect for the age of the matriarch present; or perhaps the civility grew out of the family heritage, in which several generations have served as missionaries and ministers in the Presbyterian Church. Perhaps they have bequeathed to each new generation some subtle awareness of the power of God being greater than all human powers.

*The name of God is above every name that is named,
Human or divine,
In this age,
In the age to come.*

Amen.