

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

November 23, 2014      Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost  
Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24

Ephesians 1:11-23

Stephen Ministry

## **The King of Love...**

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian year. We celebrate that because Christ emptied himself of the authority of God and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross, God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name. Therefore every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth should bow to him. (Philippians 2:6-10) He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. (Revelation 19:16)

The Church through the ages has gotten a lot of mileage from this regal imagery. The royal pageantry, the cathedrals, the robes, the brass, even the crown: "All hail the power of Jesus' name, let angels prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him Lord of All!"

Personally I love this imagery. I love the pomp and beauty, the joy and formality. I also love Christ the King, because in Jesus, earthly kingship – the actual kingship of people then and here and now – is overturned, and redefined. Like so many images for God / Christ, if we take them literally and apply our earthly expectations to them, we end up with an understanding of who God is, which is in fact far from who He really is!

For example, the Rev. Sue Hauptert-Johnson writes about how an image used to describe a church she served, while sounding good, didn't serve them well at all. She writes:

*Many years ago I served a small family church where the members always described themselves as the "church family." That image was so predominant that the church took it literally and extended little hospitality to those who were not their blood relatives. Their focus on church as family limited their outreach and growth.*

*It got so bad that I finally suggested that we not refer to the church as a "family" for a year. We shifted our emphasis to a more open, expansive and joyous understanding of the Church as the body of Christ. We celebrated that every person is called to be part of the body of Christ and that every person has gifts needed by the body.*

*It worked. A year later they were more welcoming, they were more open, they had their behavior and their actions changed. They did it so well that a few years later we could call ourselves family again, because their understanding of their identity as a Church was richer and deeper.*

It's the same with the image of King. Sometimes we need to reframe a common word/image to gain a deeper understanding of it. To quote Inigo Montoya from the movie *The Princess Bride*, "You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means."

Ezekiel 34, today's Old Testament reading, describes the kingdom and reign of God without kingly imagery. Instead we have another image: that of shepherd. So imagine a king, who acts and rules, more like a shepherd caring for his flock.

God, our king, comes as a shepherd. Up until now, His shepherds have failed to do their job:  
they have not gathered in the weak sheep  
they have not sought out the lost or healed the sick  
or done what God has called them to do.

So God, out of great love for humanity and powerful compassion for the lost, goes forth.  
*"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will make them lie down," says the Lord God.*  
*"I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak...."*

God takes off and joins the search. God has left the building, so to speak.  
And we need to as well!

We need to follow God out of the sanctuary – but first we need to confess our reluctance to go. Our time here is so nice – so comfortable – so lovely! First of all the room is beautiful, the music is excellent, the peaceful moments of prayer (while maybe not long enough) are so peaceful, the focus on God, Jesus, Holy Spirit is centering / rejuvenating. The very word, sanctuary, means safe place, and here we are (or at least we should be) SAFE.

And these are all reasons to relax, big sigh...., sing, pray, have some coffee and conversation and think "we've done it; this is what the Christian faith is about and for."

Except that it's not.

You see, to live into God's kingdom, to obey Christ's call upon our lives, we must join God/Jesus in the search, in the great shepherding work. Our God is a wandering God willing to engage in the nasty, challenging, dangerous work of shepherding.

Which is also what Christians – that's us – are to do as well. To go and search for the lost. To wander through the community. To go where others don't go. To go into situations that others avoid.

Today in a few minutes, we'll be commissioning our first class of Stephen Ministers. Stephen Ministry is a Christian care giving program. In the Bible, in Acts, Chapter 6, Stephen was chosen to provide caring ministry to those in need – hence the name.

Stephen Ministry began in 1975 and today there are more than 12,000 churches who've become Stephen Ministry Congregations. We will commission 7 folks from our congregation who will join with the more than 600,000 other Stephen Ministers who've been trained over the last 40 years!

The purpose of Stephen Ministry is to gather up folks in the church who feel called to visit with people in need, and give them the training they need  
to provide a good listening ear,  
to know how to offer intentional Christian friendship to someone going through a difficult time,  
to pray with and for their care-receiver,  
to offer hope and encouragement.

Andrea McDonough has been their teacher, leading our 7 Stephen Ministers through a series of lessons to equip them for this ministry. And so today we commission them to this ministry. The way Stephen Ministry works is like this:

You – or perhaps someone you know – is going through a particularly difficult time...

It could be that some thing has happened –  
a death in the family, the loss of a job,  
a divorce, a diagnosis,  
an accident or operation with a long recovery.

Or it could be some thing more subtle,

like a seasonal depression, and you already have a therapist, but you want a Christian friend to be praying with and for you as well.

Or things at work are more than stressful, and you know you need to make a change, and the transition is looming in front of you and it's unsettling and scary.

Or you're in a spot where you're caring for aging parents – needing to make decisions – and shepherding your son/daughter through the maze of testing and IEP's trying to make decisions there as well – and it's TOO MUCH!

So, you're in a situation, or someone you know is in a situation and you think having an extra layer of support – in particular a Christian layer of support – would be helpful.

You would start with Andrea or myself, letting us in on the situation. We would then consider the 7 people who'll be commissioned this morning and prayerfully discern who would be the best caregiver for you. (women – women / men – men)

We would facilitate your first meeting – get you connected – and the relationship goes from there. Typically you'd meet every week or every other week – you'd work that out together. What's significant about this is that when care givers are paired with care receivers – the two of you, and the two of us (Andrea and me) are the ONLY ones who know about it. Even the other Stephen Ministers don't know who is meeting with whom.

You are free to share that you have a Stephen Minister, including who it is; but the leaders and Stephen Minister will never share that you even have a Stephen Minister with anyone else. Care givers / receivers will meet for a stretch of time that makes sense given the situation, and will decide together when it's time to stop meeting.

Going forward, the 7 Stephen Ministers will also continue to meet with Andrea for Continuing Education and support so they are not just set adrift to meet with people without any support themselves.

So starting tomorrow, our Stephen Ministers are available to begin intentional caring relationships with you all; or with someone not in our church as well.

The Stephen ministry “bumper sticker” is: Christ caring **for** people, **through** people.

If the word from the Lord for today is about a Christ the King being more like a shepherd caring for his sheep, then the best example we could ever come up with is Stephen Ministry!

To live under the Kingship of Christ in the Kingdom of God, is to follow God right out those doors and to submit to the authority of the one who is the shepherd of our souls.

While coming to church is wonderful and important for our faith – the point of our faith is to SHARE our faith. What we do here, doesn't end with the postlude, or Fellowship Hour. This is just the beginning.

You know, I think the current Pope, Pope Francis is as popular as he is because he knows this so well. For Francis has gone out. He has added people to his staff whose sole job is to go out into the community, go out to the hurting, go out to be his eyes and ears, to see where the church should be at work.

I read an internet meme that said something like this: If the hardest thing you do for God in a week is get up early on Sunday morning, that's not enough. There's more to it than this hour.

With Christ as our King – we have one who's gone before us, who provides for us, who has our back, our front, and is by our side, so that we can go from this place not just to care about others, but to SERVE them.

There's a great hymn that we're not singing this morning – *The King of Love, My Shepherd Is*.

The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
and he is mine forever.

The King of love – yes! That's who we serve!  
Amen.