

THOUGHTS ON BURGER KING AND CIW ON CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY

*The Rev. Kennedy McGowan, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, FL*

Luke 1:68-79

(Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43)

I've been thinking a lot about Burger King lately (in a few minutes, I'll tell you why), and the more I've thought about them, the sorrier I feel for them. It must be hard to be the folks from Burger King. They proclaim they're king from all their signs. They have all those commercials showing the King, but they must know that it's not really true. They're not really the king of the burger restaurants. No, McDonald's is the king. They have way more stores than Burger King does. Yet still, BK goes on and on proclaiming itself as the king. I know it's their name, and all, but what a bummer to have a name that proclaims something that isn't even really true.

I've been thinking about that struggle that Burger King has, because in different ways, we deal with that same struggle. It is easy in our own lives to get confused about who is really King there too. We can think that some tough circumstance or challenge we face is king, and let it overwhelm our life. We can think that money is king, and think that we've got to cling on to as much of it as possible. We can think stuff is king, and that if we die with the most toys, we win. We can think other people's opinions of us are king, and be terrified of those opinions going against us. We can think some wound of our past is king, and let it define the rest of our life. I could go on and on with all the ways in which we can get confused about who's really king. But I've got something more important to share more than that.

I want to remind us of what or rather who is really King. Now, this being a Christian church, and it being Christ the King Sunday, you may know the answer to that one already. (If you don't know, it's Jesus.) But I don't want to share with you only who is King. I want to share why that news is the best possible news that any of us could ever here. I want to share with you how that truth can set you free as nothing else can do. I want to share how it can free not only you but even free Burger King too.

But before I share that news, I've gotta share with you a story of someone who had some major confusion about this king thing too, an old man named Zechariah.

When Jesus was getting ready to be born, one of God's top angels, Gabriel, came to Zechariah, and told him some great news. He told Zechariah that he and his equally old wife, Elizabeth were going to have a baby. The angel even waxed eloquent about what a great baby it was going to be. But Zechariah had forgotten who was king. He thought biology was king. And biology, even in the first century, proclaimed that no way could people as old as Zechariah and Elizabeth have babies. But God is the king over biology, and if God wants two old folks to make a baby, well, then by God they will. But Zechariah had forgotten that.

So he replied to the angel with the Biblical equivalent of, "You gotta be kidding. Don't you know how old I am, how old my wife is?" Now, I want to inject a piece of advice here. If an angel comes to you with some announcement, it's not a good idea to question it. Angels really don't like to be questioned, especially top angels like Gabriel. And Gabriel (after a few words of who do you think you are, Zechariah, questioning me, a top angel and all), pretty much tells Zechariah to shut his mouth. Actually, Gabriel shuts it for him. He didn't want to hear any more of Zechariah's crazy talk, so he makes it so Zechariah can't say anything until the baby is born.

So Zechariah involuntarily shuts up, until the baby is born. But then the angel lets him speak, and oh does Zechariah speak. He speaks a truth so profoundly beautiful that, if we let it, it could not only change our life; it could empower us to help change the lives of countless others, even people whom we've never met. Let's listen and hear through these words of Zechariah, what God wants to say to us.

Luke 1:68-79

Zechariah now knows who is King, and it ain't biology. The baby he holds in his arms is proof of that. Zechariah knows that God is King. If God can enable him and his wife to have a baby, then God can do anything. God can certainly honor those promises of deliverance he made to their ancestors of old.

In fact, Zechariah now knows that not only can God honor those promises, but honoring those promises is exactly what God is about to do. His son, John (later to be known as John the Baptist), will even be the herald of God's answered promises.

So that's what his words proclaim. God is coming to overturn every enemy that besets God's people. My boy is going to announce God's coming. And when that dawn of God breaks, when that light hits; evil better watch out. And those of us who are stuck in darkness and death's shadow, we can look up. God's light is coming. And in the face of that light, darkness and death don't have a chance.

Zechariah's words are true. Every day, what his words proclaim happens more and more around us. God is winning. Evil is losing. This is the awesome news that Zechariah proclaims. We already know the end of the story. We know how it all turns out. If you don't know, here's the end. God wins. God wins.

Yet, we live in a world where we hear so many voices around us proclaiming a different story. We hear proclamations of how greed will win or hatred or prejudice. We hear that power will win or wealth or violence. But just like Burger King's valiant attempts to proclaim itself the king of the burger, all those voices just aren't true. They can say it all they want, but saying it won't make it so.

No, God wins, nothing and no one else. And who is God. The Bible tells us. God is love; living, breathing, infinite love. And against this God who is love, nothing and no one else will be able to stand, not greed, not wealth, not hatred, not violence, not even death.

Now like Zechariah, we get confused. In the face of all those voices, we can lose touch with this truth. But it's true. In fact, over the last five years, a bunch of folks who you may never have even heard of, who hardly held any power or wealth at all, have found out just how true.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, is a community-based organization of farmworkers in Immokalee (rhymes with broccoli) Florida who are harvesting tomatoes destined for fast-food restaurants and grocery stores in this country. These workers earn 40-50 cents for every 32 pound bucket that they pick. At that rate they need to pick 2 tons of tomatoes to earn \$50. According to the US Department of Labor they earn about \$10,000 a year and fall below the federal poverty line. As if low wages weren't bad enough, some farmworkers are actually harvesting in conditions of modern-day slavery.

And I'm not using the word slavery as a sensational metaphor. I'm referring to conditions that meet the high standard of proof and definition of slavery under US federal laws. The CIW has worked with the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and the FBI to successfully investigate and prosecute five cases of slavery in recent years, freeing more than 1,000 slaves. These cases have been prosecuted

either under laws forbidding peonage and indentured servitude passed just after the Civil War during Reconstruction or under the 2000 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. Just two weeks ago, the oldest human rights organization in the world, Anti-Slavery International, announced that the CIW had been awarded their premier prize for their “exceptional contribution to ending slavery in the US agricultural industry.”

Faced with poverty wages that hadn't changed since 1980, the workers organized themselves to take on the force that is serving to make them poor – the fast-food and grocery industry. You see companies like Burger King buy such enormous volumes of tomatoes that they can say to the tomato growers who supply them, “I'll pay this rock bottom price and not a cent more.” The growers who are eager for these contracts can't turn to Monsanto and say, “Oh I won't pay you thus and such for seeds, I'll only pay you this much” or to John Deere and say, “I'll take that tractor but I won't pay \$300,000, I'll only pay \$20,000 for it.” So they turn to the one place where they can contain costs: farmworkers' wages. That's why their wages haven't changed in more than 25 years. Oxfam America released a study on this in 2004 that concluded “Squeezed by the buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ” (page 36).

So in 2001 the CIW called for a national consumer boycott of Taco Bell, one of the companies known to be purchasing tomatoes from FL. In 2002, the General Assembly of the PCUSA voted to support that boycott. And for four years Presbyterians got out of their comfort zones and into the streets. We refused to patronize Taco Bell restaurants or purchase Taco Bell products. We wrote letters to the company, we marched publicly with the workers, we preached, made public statements, children drew pictures. We also convened talks between Yum! Brands, Taco Bell's parent company, and the CIW. And four years later, in March of 2005, Yum! Brands signed a ground-breaking agreement with the CIW. In that agreement the company agreed to pay a penny a pound increase to farmworkers harvesting tomatoes for their suppliers. Now a penny a pound might not sound like much, but if you're making 40 cents for every 32 pound bucket, an increase of a penny per pound means you're suddenly making 72 for every 32 pound bucket – a 71% increase. In addition the company has been working with the CIW to implement an enforceable code of conduct for their tomato suppliers.

After this victory, the PCUSA stood side by side with the CIW and other allies from the religious, human rights, and student communities to confront McDonald's about these same issues. And in April 2007, just days before the CIW was to have called a boycott, McDonald's came to the table and made an agreement with the CIW. Again they're paying a penny a pound increase to farmworkers, implementing a code of conduct that's written and enforced together with the farmworkers themselves, and they're creating a third party monitoring organization to ensure suppliers adhere to the code.

So now, not only the largest restaurant company in the world, but the largest burger restaurant, the real king of the burger (sorry BK), know it's true. They know that God wins, that God can enable them to act with love and justice, and still profit in the marketplace. They are learning to turn away from those voices that say that you can't give dignity and justice to people and win in the marketplace. They know now that the marketplace doesn't have the last word. God does.

But what they know, Burger King is still confused about. They still live in that false world that proclaims that making profit and honoring people can't go together. One would think with the two largest fast-food companies in the world: McDonald's and Yum! Brands which owns Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut, Long John Silver's and A&W Restaurants, that the rest of the fast-food industry would follow, quickly. But sadly, Burger King has adamantly refused to work with the CIW. Burger King has worked overtime to

argue farmworkers aren't poor, assail the reputation of the CIW, and pretend it can do nothing and need do nothing to change conditions in the fields.

So, this, Friday, the CIW is coming to their headquarters in Miami to tell them the good news. Burger King, you can make a profit and respect people too. Those voices that tell you different, they're wrong. The marketplace isn't king. Jesus is. And when you honor what Jesus honors, everyone wins, even your shareholders. So, don't worry, it's okay that you're not King. McDonald's isn't King either nor is Yum foods. No, Christ is King. And that's good news. In fact, that news is the best news imaginable.

So this week, I invite you to pray that the folks at Burger King will hear the truth, that they will let the truth set them free. I invite you to write a letter to share that truth with the leaders at BK. I invite you to join me and people of faith and conscience as we march together with the farmworkers on Burger King this Friday. Let's join in sharing this truth, in letting that truth free Burger King, to have it God's way.

But the truth isn't just for Burger King, it's for us. If you've got confused about who's King, then I invite you to hear the truth too, to let the truth set you free. No matter what anyone might say, no matter what your circumstances or the pain of your past might proclaim, no matter what you might hear, here's the truth. Christ is King; not money or stuff or success or popularity, but Jesus. And who is Jesus. Jesus is love, incarnate, death-defying, life-liberating love. That love rules now and forevermore.

In the name of the God who loved us first, whose love led him to the cross and to resurrection life, and whose love can do more in us and in our world than we could ever ask or imagine. Amen.

If you have communion on the Sunday, you can then move on to invite people to the table, to taste and see this truth for themselves.