

The other night, the strangest and yet kind of sweetest thing happened to me while leaving the movie theater. It feels a little bit like a funny thing happened on the way to the Forum, but anyway. I was walking out of the AMC in Hampton, just minding my own business, heading towards my car. Now, I have entered into my do not care, I'd rather be comfy phase when it comes to the movies, so I am in sweats and a JMU beanie, pretty much looking like I have not a care in the world.

As I'm walking, this younger guy, probably college aged, is heading towards me. Now, obviously, as a woman in this world, I am hyperaware that I am walking through a parking lot at night, by myself, so my sense are always heightened making sure I'm aware of what's going on around me. So I'm just like, keep it walking, head to the car. And this guy just casually is like, "Have you heard the good news, ma'am?" Now, first of all, I *did not* appreciate the ma'am. I wanted to be like, I am in a hoodie and a beanie, do I look like a ma'am? But whatever. Manners and all of that. And then I'm kind of expecting a 6-7 joke, right? Like young kid just being silly and weird. So I don't really respond, just made eye contact like, what is this good news you speak of, and he just goes, "Did you know that Jesus loves you so much?" Now, this wasn't a stop and have a conversation thing, just a talking while walking past thing; it wasn't a let me stop and ask what movie

you just saw and make sure that you're saved right here at this AMC. It was just that one sentence as we passed by each other. I smiled and just went, "Amen." And he said "Amen, have a good night." And that was it.

I legit got in my car and just kept chuckling, because what in the world, right? Like it is 8:00 on a random Wednesday in November, but let's be out here spreading the good news. But the more I thought about it, the more I kept going back to it, it kind of made me warm and fuzzy. I told Jenn later that night that it was the "so much" that got me. This wasn't a yes, yes, Jesus loves you. It was a Jesus loves you so much. And the fact that it didn't come with a lot of questions and caveats and a whole evangelism speech made it meaningful. Trust and believe, if that had happened, this story would have a whole different kind of tone. But that wasn't the case, because let's be real, that kid didn't know me, knew nothing about my life, about my beliefs. I certainly am not wearing my collar to the movies so he had no idea he was telling a pastor that Jesus loved her, but it didn't matter. What mattered for him, and ultimately for me, was to remind me that Jesus loved me. At one point in our conversation, Jenn said, "Sounds like you have your sermon," and at first it didn't really click, but then I was like, wait a second...maybe I do...

Christ the King is always a strange Sunday to preach, because it's the end of the church year and so we've been trucking through all these doom and gloom, the world shall end and you will be persecuted, and yet, Advent is right around the corner and the Christmas vibes are already starting to creep in, because well, when the world is doing world things you just want some joy. So there's this weird tension, Christ the King who is the ultimate Savior and Sovereign of the world, but yet we're ready for itty, bitty, eight pound, baby in the manger Jesus. And then you throw in the texts for this week and it's like, well yes, *please* bring on Christmas, because who wants to hear about the crucifixion in November?! See? Strange. But let's roll with it and see what happens.

The whole tension of this Sunday is the compare and contrast of what the world expects and has seen from its kings and kingly figures and what we get in Jesus. It's very one of these things is not like the other. In Jeremiah, you have the prophet calling out the kings who have led God's people astray. Their leaders are supposed to set the standard for their people, particularly when it comes to life with God and the way their faith influences their lives and behavior. God has anointed them for leadership, literally made them messianic figures and so they are supposed to be the example their people can look towards when examining their relationship

with God, and yet, over and over again, the kings come up short to the point that things have deteriorated so deeply that God wants a reset. The kings have scattered the people away from God so much that God is going to just take it the final mile and scatter them completely, sending them into exile so they can reflect, repent, and restart. So this is what the people of Israel are kind of used to, kings that end up just doing their own thing, despite claiming to be the shepherd of their people. They aren't interested in anyone except themselves, and so the consequences for the people they lead are kind of mute to them. As long as they themselves are good, all is well.

And then we do a hard left turn into the gospel, and you can tell the kingly expectations are still there, but Jesus is uninterested in meeting them. Jesus is constantly told if he is the Messiah, the chosen one, the king, he should be able to save himself, that's what any other king would do, and yet he refuses. This comes to a head when the two criminals who are dying next to him get their say in the matter. One of them operates from those expectations, not only for Jesus but for himself. If you can save yourself, you can save me too! Be a king like I want you to be and get me out of here! But the other recognizes the moment, the different kind of king Jesus is, and is simply looking for a reminder that he is loved, that even in the midst of this darkest and most terrifying of moments, he will ultimately be

ok. Remember me when you come into your kingdom. Remember I am one of God's children, even though I have messed up. Remember me and love me when you become king on high. And Jesus promises him that he will. Even hanging on a cross, in pain and dying, Jesus essentially says, have you heard the good news? I love you so much...

As all of this came together, it got me thinking about a question that came up in Bible study this week as they are wont to do. When the rubber of our faith meets the road of our lives, do we use Jesus as a prop or tool for our own means or do we receive him as a source of hope, forgiveness, grace, and accountability? All those kings that Jeremiah is speaking out against were using God as a means to justify their own behavior; to say, God anointed me so my behavior must be God ordained. I, as your king, can tell you what God thinks and it must be right. The criminal telling Jesus to save himself and them? That wasn't an act of faith, that was a demand. If you're so powerful, get me out of this. What can you do for me lately, Jesus? My guy in the parking lot...I was fully anticipating that conversation getting spun into a let me tell you my God agenda. In some alternate universe that conversation resulted in, well, what movie did you just go see? Would God be ok with that? Let's talk about sin and hellfire and damnation based mostly around my morality and politics, not anything God has actually said.

So often God's love is used as a prop for agendas, hatred, and things that have nothing to do with love or the gospel.

The other criminal though? My guy in the parking lot? Those few kings who got it right during the time of the prophets? They knew what the actual good news was and is. Jesus isn't there to advance some agenda based on what *we* think is important. Jesus is there to offer us grace and love in the face of unquestionable unworthiness, and to push us to use that grace we have received for good in the world. The criminal who asked Jesus to remember him? He owned that he had done something worthy of the punishment he was receiving, and Jesus didn't condemn him for it, or say you have to repent and do x, y, z before I remember you in my kingdom and welcome you into paradise. Jesus saw him and loved him, full stop, no questions asked, and so when we're faced with this reality, how do we jump to the idea that Jesus tells *us* it's our job to decide whom he loves and how?

We jump there because more often than not we are more interested in Jesus as a prop for our own needs as opposed to a genuine North Star for how we are called to live. Somewhere along the way we decided that by acknowledging Christ as our king it gave us full rights and authority to act like kings of one another. If we believe in Christ the king then we get to be his representatives on earth, doling out punishment and judgment based on

our own feelings as opposed to anything actually centered in the gospel message. But y'all that is nowhere in the Bible. Over and over again, Jesus says that our one job is to love one another, as he loved us. To forgive as we have been forgiven. To feed the hungry, heal the sick, let the oppressed go free, and leave all the weeds and wheat business to him.

It is not our job or the job of anyone else to be the Lord and king over our siblings. It is not for us to condemn or to judge, but to love and love and then love some more. It doesn't mean no accountability, but it does mean that we don't dictate what is and isn't worthy of condemnation based upon our own preconceived notions and opinions. If we truly, truly and honestly confess Christ as king, then we need to take a hard look at how we operate in the world—how we act, how we use Jesus, and frankly who we prop up upon pedestals and declare as king above all other. To confess Christ as king is to say that he is the end all and be all, where we take our guidance and our life, not as a reason we can use him to get what we want or condemn others because we want to see them get what we think they deserve. It does not need to be as complicated or as selfish as we make it. It doesn't need to be some long drawn out treatise on faith. Sometimes to confess Christ as king is to simply ask, hey have you heard the good news? And to let the good news just be, Jesus loves you so much, no questions asked. **AMEN!!!**