

Full disclosure: when I began the process of writing this sermon, the forecast said we would have a 50% chance of rain today. That's a coin flip. Can you believe our luck? Maybe God knows something we don't. Well, certainly God knows something we don't, there's no question about that, quite a few things, actually. But for us to be able to gather, indoors, outdoors, old altar, new altar, ultimately, it doesn't really matter. They're both beautiful spaces, they both turn our hearts to God, they both make us appreciate the gifts of those who have come before and our opportunity to stand where others stood - or will stand. I've been meeting with our Worship Commission to think through how we will emerge, when the time comes, from this pandemic era of our lives. It seems we have a window of time, a chance to peer out and imagine what we could be, and in this window, we have the chance to define how we are going to adapt to the changing needs of our world.

I'm gonna keep things brief this morning. God knows your Southern priest has gotten acclimated to living in the North, and with that, these blistering 80-degree days are wearing me out. Don't tell any of your Southern friends; I'll lose all my street cred. But as we look through this window with new altar ready to go and old altar standing firm, we occupy this liminal space. We are rooted in who we have always been, and we stand ready to serve in new and ancient ways. James says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. To be "unstained," we can't let the way the world works define us. We are not partisan. We do not serve the interests of the wealthy nor do we let rulers of the earth and powers of this realm get away with whatever they want just because they're registered to vote the same way we do. No. To be unstained, we serve the agenda of God, which, make no mistake, is political in that it affects the *polis*, the gathered body of people. To be unstained, we serve God's interest. And I know you might think it can be hard to suss out what is God's interest. Sometimes it is, but it's not so hard as to paralyze us with indecision and inaction. God's interest is made clear to us throughout scripture. Love God, love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Yes, even *that* enemy. Serve those who no one else will serve. When James says "care for widows and orphans," sure we can do that directly, and should, make no mistake. But the widows and orphans for James were uniquely set up in their *polis* to suffer by being overlooked by the oppressive system that swept them aside. In our own time, our system isn't great with widows and orphans, but they also aren't alone. There are far, far too many people -- individuals and groups -- that are swept aside, better to be forgotten than even noticed. At least, better to be forgotten, if you serve the interests of the world.

What does an act of service for a nobody on the street get you? Do you get ahead, get that raise, get tenure because you stopped to serve the least of these? Not in this world. Maybe you get a pat on the back, but you're not going to get the corner office because you dropped a quarter in somebody's cup. The claim God makes on us, though, says it's not about gain. We don't serve because of what it might get us. Among other things, God's interest is to remove the temptation to see our interactions with other people as transactional. Because we believe in God, we serve God's people, all of them. We don't earn anything in doing so, we simply are the fruits of God's love, and it is by these fruits, by us, that the world comes to know that love. There's a wonderful line from the former archbishop of Brazil, Helder Camara. He said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist." They just missed the point.

Now, I'm not trying to saying God wants us to be Communists. With all its failings, just like any human-designed system, Communism falls short of God's interest. Fun fact: did y'all know this is why we have Christ the King Sunday? Yeah, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, just before Advent and Christmas, we

celebrate Christ's kingdom, not any of our world's. The celebration originated in the middle of the 20th Century as a result of the Cold War and all the debates over who got it right, capitalists or communists. The Church came together and said, "no one. Not one of these systems is right but the Kingdom of God." Whether you're here or Haiti or Norway or Canada or wherever, if you're a Christian, serving God isn't about economic systems or means of governance or whatever, it's about promoting God's interest. Of course, we are limited by the contexts we're in, so we serve how we can where we are. Sometimes that means standing at God's altar and proclaiming the truth of God's love, sometimes it means giving out meals in the breadlines, and sometimes it means asking why there are breadlines in the first place. No earthly system gets it all right, but they all can be bent a little closer to the Kingdom of God, and that's our job.

Positioned here, outside in the break in weather or inside away from the rain, we begin. We serve those modern-day orphans and widows, the hungry, the swept-aside, the underside of history, the poor, the undeserving, the inconvenient. That's where God's interest lies, and that's where God's Kingdom begins. Here's where God's Kingdom begins.