

## Our Mulligan Giver

Not sure how many of you recognize the term mulligan. I was first introduced to the term by my husband who after his heart transplant fulfilled a secret dream to become an over the road truck driver. After doing that for two years, he discovered although he loved driving, he dislike the “over the road” position and so found a position driving locally. From his fellow local truckers he discovered another love...that of playing golf which is where I learned about mulligans. When Wayne and I would go out together golfing and one of our shots went way off line...Wayne declared we could take a mulligan which is a free shot—a second chance given in informal play not competition, when the first or previous shot was poorly played. That it is a real word with a definition which has been used enough that it is found in dictionaries not only with the original definition above, but is often used in cases where someone wants to claim they deserve a second chance. Politicians love this word and its meaning. When reading today’s gospel passage this term came to mind in relation to the one criminal being crucified alongside Jesus. Strangely enough as I read some commentaries on this text, some different terminology related to golfing appeared...the practice of leaving the ball which it lands, continuing playing with the ball where it is...called the ball’s lie. With those two golf images in mind, it seems there are two aspects to focus on within today’s message...the mulligans or forgiveness which Christ offers us so abundantly...and/or the way we have incorporated the views of the world into our ways of honoring Jesus...by declaring his kingship without adopting the understanding of what that reign calls for us to enact. So let’s begin with our need to redefine kingship in relationship to Jesus Christ; to understand what kind of king Jesus is; to realize what he desires for his reign to be like. When we come to these final moments of Jesus’ life, we often focus on the injustice of his death; on the innocence of Jesus which the text clearly states. Our text today describing Jesus crucifixion begins by placing him between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. We often call them thieves. Crucifixion was not actually an execution method for common criminals. It was saved for people the Roman Empire wanted to make examples of...people who had committed crimes like insurrection-civil disobedience-treason. It was for those whose activities were threatening to those in power; to the status quo. It’s why Jesus was crucified. The message that was sent to commoners was ‘Don’t oppose the State or the systems of the state. Don’t mess with the ones making a profit from those systems. If you do, you’ll end up hanging on a tree at the edge of the city. And that is what is described as happening to Jesus. His teachings and actions have given him a large following among the people. During the series of trials preceding the arrival at the site of the crucifixion, Jesus is found innocent of the charges brought against him by those in authority who feared his influence. If you step back and consider the things Jesus has done since he set his face to Jerusalem, his actions and words have been intentional...Jesus has been intentional about challenging corruption in authority, intentional about exposing systems that were oppressive, intentional in the telling of his stories and parables—knowing full well they would antagonize the religious rulers; intentional in healing—casting out demons—raising the dead—picking grain on the Sabbath, just in view of the Pharisees—intentional about turning over those tables in the Temple—infuriating the vendors; interrupting business as usual and the status quo of religious profit—intentional in the message he taught: ‘free the oppressed, give to the poor—intentional in inclusion instead of exclusion; to love instead of to judge—knowing full

well that his message of shalom building would lead him intentionally to the cross. From the beginning Jesus told his disciples, and anyone who would listen, “follow me”. The reality of what he was asking us to do in “following him” is to join him in a radical social justice movement to participate in the new reign of God—to help usher in the reign of God he proclaimed near. In this text Jesus is on the cross. It’s not the place you’d look for a king under the world’s understanding of kingship, but then nothing is ever quite what you expect with Jesus. And frankly, Americans are not really keen on the whole concept of kingship. Also, using the term king as we understand and use it to describe Jesus and his mission threatens to miss the whole point of the gospel because of the way “king” plays to a static sense of order rather than a dynamic sense of God’s rule coming to earth. The kingdom of God is not simply about supplanting an earthly ruler with a heavenly one. In heralding the coming kingdom of God, Jesus was not advocating for a regime change, but was announcing the advent of an entirely different way of being in relationship with each other and with God. It’s not that Jesus’ kingship means a change in the ruler, but a change in the realm in which we live. The earliest Christian confession was simply: *Christos Kyrious*—Christ is Lord. If proclaiming that simply meant giving our allegiance to a different ruler while treasonous then, now most of our lives could remain untouched. As long as we didn’t swear allegiance to some Caesar or king, that is, we could more or less conduct business as usual and conceive of faith as a private affair. But the kingdom that Jesus proclaims represents a whole new reality where nothing is the same—not our relationships or rules, not our view of self or others, not our priorities or principles—nothing. Everything we thought we knew about kings and their kingdoms gets turned on its head. In the parables and actions of Jesus we get a glimpse of what kind of king he is as well as what type of kingdom he rules. There is the offensively generous employer who defies all the conceptions of fair play by paying both those who have worked all day and those who labored only a few hours the same; there is the story of the Good Samaritan; there is the story of the Prodigal. These are just glimpses of what kingdom life will be, but are enough to show that everything in the realm of God will be different. But truthfully we need to understand the realm of God over which Christ is king is not lurking somewhere “out there”. It is already here among us, heralded by Jesus’ preaching and made manifest in his death and resurrection. Yes, total fulfillment still waits in the future, yet the new realm is already here, in our very midst. That means that we are citizens in both realms. We are citizens of this world and citizens of the kingdom Jesus inaugurated. Perhaps that is why some would push Jesus’ realm totally into the future while others would retreat from the one we’re in. Either extreme is easier than holding—and living in—the tension, the paradox—of living in two worlds. This understanding of God’s kingdom present among us hasn’t taken hold within our actions as a society. If we believe that Christian faith isn’t just allegiance to a different sovereign but rather is entrance into an entirely new realm, then who knows what God will expect from us. It is challenging to contemplate living according to the kingdom rules of Jesus Christ. No longer is our faith a private matter, we can no longer ignore the plight of our neighbor, or ignore the plight of God’s good earth. Much of our life is governed by the rules of this world, rules that while they may be improved will never fully usher in the justice, the equity, the shalom that God has promised until we accept and adopt that kingdom’s ways in our daily living. But having a glimpse of the realm Jesus describes, we can never be satisfied with the way things are, never deterred from emulating, even actualizing, the kingdom of God present in our midst. Between the two

criminals, being mocked by the soldiers and others in a crowd, enduring a shameful public death is not where you expect to find a king. Watchers mock Jesus by questioning whether or not the placard above his head proclaiming him “King of the Judeans” is true or fake news. They cry out that “if he was God’s anointed, he could come down and save himself.” In the temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness just after his baptism, Jesus answered his response to this temptation: “Do not put God to the test.” His painful obedience to God’s purpose put him there and kept him there. To the second focus or message within this text for us is found in the reactions of the two criminals being crucified with him. One of the other being crucified joins in that mockery, probably hoping to be spared from the crucifixion himself if his mocking taunts work. However the other chides him lifting up Jesus’ innocence and asks to be remembered by Jesus “when you come into your kingdom”. Jesus’ response is to promise him that he will join him in Paradise. There is no repentance expressed by him although he acknowledges his guilt, there is no time to exhibit a changed life: there is just grace, mercy and forgiveness. This criminal has accepted in utter sincerity the inscription above Jesus’ head the identification of Jesus as “King”. He speaks to Jesus in a startlingly personal and intimate fashion addressing him directly by name and not with a sarcastic use of a title. Jesus accepts him and offers salvation...entrance into Paradise. The word used which translates as Paradise in our texts is the same word used for Eden’s garden. Jesus completes his mission by remaining on the cross; the mission by which the unrighteous may share in the salvation of the righteous. His reign is not a death-dealing system intent on punishment, but a “paradise” that “today” extends even to those whom we do not think deserve it. Jesus’ reign offers unending second chances—mulligans—to those who repent and seek grace and mercy allowing God to transform them and their lives. May we seek to enter more fully into the space where Jesus Christ is king every day. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.