

## Sermon for Christ the King Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I was puttering around the house catching up on chores when I stumbled on an old memory. See, I had this old coat that needed replacing. It used to be the liner for a bigger coat, but the outer shell long ago wore out. The liner-turned-outerwear held up for about a decade and a half but recently gave up the ghost. It was covered in paint splatters, the zipper only worked on non-consecutive Tuesdays, and the pockets were full of holes leading to alternate dimensions. Shoot, even the stuffing was coming out in odd places, reminiscent of turkey dinners past. All that to say, I needed a new coat, one for in-between fleece and parka weather. So I booked it to Tractor Supply and snagged an honest, functional replacement. But as soon as I got home, I started sneezing and felt a little tickle in one ear. As it turns out, one should avoid venturing into cold, snowy winds without something to stave off the early winter bluster. I mean, that's why I was there in the first place. I suppose I could've given that battered old coat one last hurrah, but it seemed cruel to wear that old thing at the same time I found its crisp replacement. But that little foray into the cold -- and probably a few others before it, too -- got the best of me. You'd think after so many winters up here, I'd've learned by now to risk being overly toasty instead of shoulder-shruggingly cold. I never claimed to be a quick learner. So, I got home and started sneezing and grumbling at my own hubris and went straight for the garlic to rub on my feet.

Now, if that was a turn you weren't expecting, I can tell right away that you weren't raised in the same hills I was. Garlic'll cure what ails ya. It's what some folks call Granny Magic, or in the hills and hollers of my home, Memaw Magic. I think of myself as a fairly rational person most of the time, but I did this without thinking. It's ingrained somewhere so deep I didn't know it was there. I didn't even think about it. It's just what you do. Think you're catching a cold? Garlic on your soles. Thing is, I didn't catch a cold. Probably just getting warm, taking a nap, and eating my vegetables were the real reasons. But, as it turns out, there are some medicinal benefits to garlic. Ingesting it can help with immune functioning. Rubbing it on rashes sometimes helps clear 'em up. It tends to work better than over-the-counter sprays on things like athlete's foot, or so I'm told. All that to say, I got cold, rubbed garlic on my feet, and did not get sick. Superstition? Maybe. Science? Perhaps. But the correlation is there, and it's so strong that after years of not giving it any thought, there I was, socks off in the kitchen, sitting at the table, wondering what I'd just done to a perfectly good clove.

Memaw Magic seeped in in all sorts of ways I didn't realize. Only in the last few years have I really become aware of it. Out at the land, I was thinking about getting some dowsing rods and doing some water witchin'. I've been paying attention to woolly bears and bees to see how bad winter's gonna be, and I've been searching for a glimpse of cutlery hiding in a persimmon seed. Just can't find any persimmons to look inside! I've also been thinking about driving some iron rods into the corners of my property to keep boogers and the bank at bay. I know there'll be a broom and maybe a horseshoe in my new house. I know there's names you never say out loud. I know you can whistle all you want, but keep quiet walking in the woods. And I know night brings its own wonders and terrors most cityfolk'd look at you sidewise for if you told 'em what we hillbillies know to be true. I don't think I realized how deeply affected I was by all those stories. Certainly as a kid, that was just life. As a teenager, I rolled my eyes at the practices and the people that kept 'em alive. As a younger adult, I went off nomad-like for so long that I didn't have any roots to dig up for potions. But these days, I'm settling in enough for the waters of old to bubble to the surface. And being up here, it's even more noticeable because so many folks don't have a clue what I'm talking about.

When I start going on about Memaw Magic, a lot of folks get funny ideas about my family and the women that kept us going. They weren't pagans, though they held onto some pagan practices. They weren't witches, though they stocked their shelves with odd items meant for brewing and whispering over. They were

Christians, no two ways about it. Both my grandmas and nearly every older woman they filled their lives with were honest-to-God dedicated church-goers. They didn't understand what they did with their potions and cures as witchcraft, though an outside observer might not make a distinction. Also, I'm pretty sure every one of them would've laid a curse on anybody that called what they did "magic" while completely missing the irony. What they did was worship God and then use the tools of the earth God gave us to direct their lives. It was deeply ingrained in them, and they never questioned it. Mary's the one I learned a lot of this from. Sue gave less, as she was more of a city girl, but she had her moments. Pebble and Ophelia gave some real good ones, and all they taught me they owed to generations stretching back to Scotland, Ireland, and a whole mix of other places and other peoples.

Now today is Christ the King Sunday. It's meant to remind us that the rulers of this world are not God *and* are not inherently sacred. Germany isn't. France isn't. Russia isn't. England, Colombia, Saudi Arabia aren't. America, South Africa, China aren't. Name any country, friend or foe, and it always falls short of Christ on his throne. Not even Vatican City, beautiful as it is, not even the Vatican -- or for us Anglicans, not even Canterbury can live up to that. Nations are human creations, and while they're not necessarily evil, they're also not sacred. You may be proud of where you're from, you may love your country, you may even serve your country, and that's all just fine, even admirable. But Christ the King Sunday reminds us that no matter what your nationality, your nation is capable of great and terrible things. No matter what your nationality, your proud country can do wrong, almost certainly has done wrong, and it is not the rightful recipient of your worship. Only the Kingdom of God is.

For some of us, hearing that's a difficult thing to process. I'm rather fond of my country's lofty claims for humanity. I love the platonic ideal of America, but the reminder that it's not perfect and not sacred is a tough pill to swallow. And, if America's flawed, what does that say about our nation-state enemies? Or our allies? We all fall short of the justice, dignity, and equality of God's Kingdom. But for others, hearing all this is obvious. No country's perfect? You don't say. If you already know that deep in your bones, good. Don't unlearn it. Keep God where God belongs, and keep your patriotism where it belongs. There's something about this that we know in our bones. We kinda know that we can always do better. Even the Founding Fathers knew this. In the Preamble to the Constitution, they establish "a more perfect union," perhaps more perfect than the kind from before, or perhaps an ever-evolving and ever-improving body, or perhaps both. They knew we weren't perfect then and wouldn't get to perfect ever, but we could inch closer.

I think about this -- who we are as a nation, what we believe our nation is capable of doing, where we point the blame when things go wrong -- I think about this in a similar way to that ol' Memaw Magic my grandmas practiced. It's deep in us, so deep we don't always know we're responding from that place. The claim that Christ the King holds on us challenges all those deep, subconscious values. Where do we put our faith? Like Grandma Mary, I can be Christian and American (and fond of garlic) all at the same time. I don't feel a contradiction most days. But once in a while, what we get up to brings out unexpected friction 'cause there's sheep and goats inside all of us. What the American in me says and what the Christian in me says don't always agree. And when they don't, even if it feels naive, we step to the Christian side every time. Naive, perhaps, but faithful and sacred. It's a high bar, but it's one we can train ourselves to meet. We practice it in small ways here, sometimes in bigger ways, and it seeps out those doors into all sorts of places. It goes with us to Parry's and Christmas tree lightings and childrearing. In time, practice becomes a sort of ethical muscle memory. And before you know it, you're doing the spiritual equivalent of sitting in the kitchen with a clove of garlic in hand wondering how you ended up in this naive place that works beyond reason. I've thought a lot through the years about the faith my family instilled in me. But it's only been recently that I've come to think of the totally normal and average way I grew up as influencing me in uncommon ways in a new setting. No matter where I go, I

bring Memaw Magic with me, and I love that I carry that and the women who taught me. Ya know, faith can be a similar thing, the place we turn without thinking, the comfort of scientifically dubious yet calming tinctures, the pinnacle of identity.

Our world is not perfect. But it does have beauty, and it makes plenty of space for choosing the sacred. And if we practice enough, it becomes the easiest thing to do 'cause we don't even have to try. It simply is, and we choose to be in its presence with one truth hovering above every other claim: that no matter what, from memaws to nations to you and me, no matter what, Christ is King.