In 1992 British anthropologist Robin Dunbar published a study in the *Journal of Human Evolution* entitled, “Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates.” And while I am sure this paper is as riveting as it sounds and will soon to be turned into a blockbuster movie laden with CGI explosions and witty repartee between the superhero protagonists, the part I want to focus on is the paper’s conclusion. In this paper Dunbar correlated the volume of a primates’ neocortex with the number of members the primate can track in a social group. Dunbar then extrapolated from this data the number of members we as humans can track and concluded that this number is 150. This conclusion is known Dunbar’s number. What Dunbar’s number basically tells us is that we humans can maintain about 150 stable relationships, meaning we are capable of about 150 relationships that go beyond the superficial. To back up the reliability of his number Dunbar gave a number examples such as 150 being the average size of a Neolithic farming village and also the basic unit size of professional armies in Roman antiquity. To illustrate the implications of this theory let me give you an example. If one of these 150 people in our social group needed a ride to the airport we would probably take them whereas if someone outside of this group wanted us to take them to the airport we would be more likely to suggest they get an Uber. And while this is interesting it also points out a problem and that problem is if 150 is the size of our social group we tend to be suspicious of those who are not in our group or tribe. It’s not just that we won’t give them rides to the airport but historically speaking humans have tended to deal with people who were not in their social group by killing them and carting off their women.

The other night Amy and I went to see West Side Story at Oconomowoc High School, which more or less explains the implications of Dunbar’s Law if Dunbar’s Law could dance and belt out toe tapping show tunes. As most of you know the play tells the tale of two rival gangs on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the 1950’s. One gang is the Sharks who are comprised of Puerto Ricans and the other is the Jets who appear to be mainly Polish for some reason. One of the underlying themes in the play is that they don’t like each other because they are from different tribes. And in many ways this is the history of humanity when we behave tribally there is nothing to keep Chino from shooting Tony. For people not to break off into tribes something has to change.

Which leads us to ask the question: If our natural instinct is to have a relatively small circle of trust how are we able to function in a society that is much larger than 150? The quick answer is that in order to be civil to those who are not in our circle of trust we need to submit ourselves to something larger than our tribe. There are various “larger” things that can work and throughout history there are lots of bad examples of how societies have coalesced around something. Most often those bad things were a king or dictator – the Romans had emperor worship, the Nazis had Hitler and the master race nonsense and the Chinese seem to submit their lives to Winnie the Pooh (or Xi Jinping as he prefers to be called), but since this is Church let’s see if we can find something around which to coalesce that is a little more Biblical. And to do that we need to get to our readings…

Let’s start with the Old Testament. In Jeremiah we read, “Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.” First off let’s get a little background on this passage. It comes at the end of a series of passages in Jeremiah condemning the kings of Judah for basically doing a really bad job. They have been to good leadership what Norwegian food is to fine dining. Or if you would like it in terms that do not offend Norwegians these kings have acted in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics and created entropy. The once united culture is now spread hither and yon and so God now says that he will bring them back to the fold. There are small tribes of worshipers who God plans to unite. And at least to my mind this sounds a lot like Dunbar’s law – a bunch of disparate groups who want nothing to do with one another are off in their own corners. And, as I said, in order for unity to happen there has to be something larger inserted into the mix which will subsume these competing tribes and that something is God. That is why he says, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock.” The groups will be united under the lordship of Almighty God.

This is Godly unity and this is the only unity truly worth seeking. See the real trick in society is to not just avoid killing rival gangs but to love and embrace the rest of humanity. And we have this reading from the Old Testament today because it is Christ the King Sunday, a Sunday where we reflect on whom we submit our lives to. Today we remember the importance of submitting our entire being to Christ because that is the only way we can truly love our fellow man. Because it is only in the Kingship of Jesus that all of the barriers between humanity break down whether those barriers are tribes of 150 or countries of 100 million. And while Dunbar chalks up our ability to only relate to 150 people to the size of our neocortex the real problem is sin. If we were not sinful we might still only be able to relate to 150 people but we would not despise those who were not part of the 150. And Jesus is the only King that can deal with the sin that separates us one from another, that is why he is the perfect king. But now let’s get back to 1950’s musical theater for a moment.

The problem with the Jets and Sharks was not that the Jets had better song and dance numbers, the problem was that through their sinfulness they could not see each other as children of God. And the reason for this because they were blinded by their tribe. They could only define the world through who was in and who was out. And if you watch our politics these days, and how we relate to each other in general, we have grown so tribal. And our tribes may be bigger than 150 but they are tribes nonetheless which will not let us see each other as being created in God’s image. If our society is ever going to heal it is not going to be done through zero sum politics but will be done because we acknowledge Christ as our King. And let me clarify that being under the Kingship of Christ is not just another way to create a tribe that separate us one from the other, but is rather a way for us to love of humanity no matter who they are. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book *Life Together* he says, “Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together.” Yes we want everyone to ultimately be under the Kingship of Christ but this will only be through us acting in accordance with Christ’s commands and having our sins forgiven while we forgive those who have sinned against us. [Let me end with a story that I may have used before which illustrates what I am talking about.

Between the years 249 and 262 the Roman Empire was hit with a plague, which was referred to as the plague of Cyprian. At its peak 5,000 people were dying each day. Common practice in those days was for healthy people to flee the places where the plague had struck and leave those afflicted behind to fend for themselves. Christians did something different. Bishop Dionysius of Carthage said this of his fellow Christians, “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves, and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ.” As for the effect of this compassion and care shown by Christians to non-Christians let me quote the historian Eusebius, “[The Christian’s] deeds were on everyone’s lips, and they glorified the God of the Christians. Such actions convinced them that they alone were pious and truly reverent to God.” 53 years later in 313 Christianity was legalized and by 380 it had become the official religion the Roman Empire. The Kingship of Christ spread and broke down the tribalism of the ancient world by Christians by loving everyone as Christ has loved us.] May we submit our lives to Christ the King so that we may spread his kingdom and be his this day and forevermore.