

The Promise of Living

November 26, 2023

The Promise of Living

One of my favorite Thanksgiving traditions is to listen to “The Promise of Living” from Aaron Copeland’s opera, “The Tender Land.” In fact, I think one of the reasons Eric, our Administrative Assistant, took the day off on Monday is because he’s so sick of hearing it from across the hall!

The song begins: “The promise of living, with hope and thanksgiving, is born of our loving our friends and our labor.” Truth!

This weekend is one of those rare accidents of the calendar, when the Sunday after Thanksgiving is not the first Sunday of Advent. Because the 24th of December is a Sunday, this year we’ll get the most truncated Advent possible, just 22 short days. And I mean short days – it practically feels like the darkness is settling over us around noon...and night is falling so early, too.

(See what I did there?)

What this means in the churches that use the Lectionary is that this weekend is Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. It’s one more of the celebrations of the church that I think most of us have gotten completely wrong. So often, when we hear the title “Christ the King,” we ascribe to Jesus attributes of an earthly king: He will RULE OVER us. He will come in POWER and MIGHT. He will even DESTROY OUR ENEMIES. Many times, he is even depicted with a jeweled crown, sitting on a gilt throne with ermine fringed robes.

It’s funny, whenever I’m leading a Bible Study and we talk about how it is that so many people of Jesus’ time didn’t recognize that he was the Messiah, people are quick to give voice to the idea that that was because folks were expecting a king like David, a king who would wield military and political power, and that folks in 1st century Palestine didn’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah because he was ushering in a completely different way of being, a way of mutuality, a leadership through relationality rather than dominance and control...folks who’ve been around churches long enough have heard this before.

What’s wild is that we then turn around and put Jesus in crowns and capes. Jesus’ ways were about inclusion and finding new solutions to age-old problems, and we somehow put him back into the box with ideas like Onward Christian Soldiers.

Friends, as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, we need to take a hard look at how, so often, we worship a Jesus who is made in our own image and likeness. So much of what Jesus taught was about not co-opting the ways of the empire. That’s what he was talking about a few weeks ago in the Gospel when he said that we’re not to call anyone father. It’s not that he had a problem with calling your dad your dad. It’s about the fact that, in Jesus’ time, the role of father was that of a mini-emperor of the household, with all of the rights and privileges that entailed.

By telling us not to call anyone on earth father, Jesus was saying, “Don’t buy into the domination systems perpetuated by the empire.” That top-down power stuff is antithetical to who Jesus was and what he is calling us to be.

The Scriptures

This is borne up by our scriptures today. Rather than passages about smiting our enemies, on Reign of Christ Sunday we read of recognizing God in the least among us, the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned. And this is important, because it’s not enough to say what Christ the King is NOT.

The great United Church of Christ scripture scholar, Walter Bruggemann, says that the prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, to grieve in a society that practices denial, and to express hope in a society that lives in despair. THAT describes the Reign of Christ. Not Jesus taking on the ways of our political systems, but rather, yearning for, and even dedicating our resources and our very beings, to the day when Jesus’ ways are what rule the day.

The passage from Deuteronomy that Ed read for us today ends:

Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth. Rather, remember the LORD your God, for it is God who gives you power to get wealth, in order to confirm the covenant sworn to your ancestors, which God is doing today.” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

That Thanksgiving song I noted as I began, The Promise of Living, starts out “The promise of living with hope and thanksgiving is born of our loving our friends and our labor.”

It goes on:

“The promise of growing with faith and with knowing is born of our sharing our love with our neighbor. The promise of loving, the promise of growing, is born of our singing in joy and thanksgiving.”

Here in the U.S., as we round out the Thanksgiving weekend, many with football and leftovers, I’d like to suggest that the task before us is to put a conscious effort into not co-opting the ways of the empire, what Bruggemann calls “Pharaoh’s production-consumption society.”

To do this, I invite you to turn your attention to the worksheet I asked the ushers to hand out. On it is a poem by Rev. Molly Bolton. What I’d like to do with our remaining time is to read through it with you stanza by stanza, giving a bit of time between each verse for you to add your thoughts. Some of you may choose to add to the gratitude Rev. Bolton names. Some may choose to react or name how your gratitude differs from what Rev. Bolton expresses. Whatever comes to you, this is an exercise for YOU to flex what it means to live the reign of Christ. Some of you may choose to share your reflections with me at a later date, but start out thinking this reflection is for your eyes only.

We are grateful for children
teaching us that gentleness, care,
play, and imagination are our birthrights.

We are grateful for elders—
human, flora, & fauna—
who hold stories of our belonging.

We are grateful for the wisdom of the land
who shows us there is enough for all
when we take only what we need.

We are grateful for those who mend, lend, and collaborate
their way into abundant living—
teaching us the richness of divesting from corporate greed.

We are grateful for dreamers—
Singing, dancing, and planting forth
the world to come.

We are grateful for organizers
whose strategies and historic memories
shake loose chains of violation.

We are grateful for the courageous
whose solidarity has teeth,
whose compassion risks something.

We are grateful for comrades
who throw sand in the cogs
of the machine of oppression.

We are grateful for
Truth Tellers, Truth Yellers,
Way Makers, Pattern Breakers.

Our gratitude is not a flippant thing,
it does not gloss over violence,
it does not forget about grief—
it holds in its trembling hands
the preciousness of living,
feels the weight of all that has been lost,
draws us to a deeper connection
with all that could be,
blooms us into better ways of being.

— Rev. Molly Bolton

Conclusion

Friends, we contribute to the reign of Christ when we live, not according to the Empire, but rather according to Jesus' ways. When the world says happiness is found when you buy, buy, buy, let's recognize the godliness in time spent with loved ones. When the world says the only way to achieve safety is to annihilate our enemy, let's commit ourselves to getting to know them and figuring out what makes them tick. When the world tries to fill up our calendars with more and more and more, let's consider the lilies of the fields, how they neither sow nor reap.

THIS is the promise of living, and it is what Jesus was freeing us for. It's hard work, throwing off the chains of the empire. That's why I'm so glad that we're in this together! And, in that, may Christ's ways be our lamp and our path. Alleluia, and amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Deuteronomy 8:7-18, Matthew 25:31-46
November 26, 2023