

“REJOICE AND BE GLAD”

By The Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 5:1-12

(11-22-20) Reign of Christ

Today is the last Sunday of the year. You might be thinking, what on earth is Victor talking about? The pandemic has really gotten to him, he's losing his marbles. But of course, I'm talking about the church year, not the calendar year. Today is the final Sunday before we begin a new church year next week with the first Sunday in Advent. I can't believe it's already almost Advent, then 4 weeks later it will be Christmas. I'm not ready for Christmas, are you? How do you prepare for Christmas in the midst of a global pandemic? We will leave that to another day. For today, we celebrate this Sunday, this last Sunday of the church year which we call the Reign of Christ Sunday or as it used to be known, Christ the King Sunday.

So what does it mean to say today is the Reign of Christ Sunday? To reign means to rule, to have authority over, to control, to be supreme. If Christ does reign, what exactly does that look like, how do we measure it, what are the metrics? Shouldn't we be able to see some evidence of his rule and reign? We conclude this morning our series of sermons on the Beatitudes of Jesus. The Beatitudes are part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his vision of what his reign and his kingdom would be like. Remember, it's his speech from the throne, the speech of a king, of Christ the King. The Beatitudes spell out what this reign and what this kingdom is to be like. The kingdom of heaven, the reign of Christ, is a time when the poor in spirit are blessed, when those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers are blessed. Those who seek to participate in the reign of Christ must know that we are blessed when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, when people revile us and say all kinds of evil falsely against us on Jesus' account.

These words seem so incompatible with the way the world really is, they did then, and they do now. Remember last week I spoke about how radical and revolutionary Jesus was in his time. He wasn't a warmly welcomed and liked figure by the powerbrokers of his time. To follow this Jesus was to invite persecution and ridicule. In the end those in power had him killed, just like all the other troublemakers. Today, in our context here in the West, Jesus hardly causes a ripple in our culture. Not many talk about Jesus as a radical or revolutionary today other than idealistic first year students in seminary. Powerbrokers today aren't threatened by the message of Jesus and his followers aren't reviled as much as they are recruited to support the political and social positions of the day. The truth is that our culture today mostly ignores Jesus. There's a polite respect offered to him as a wise and compassionate teacher, but mostly he's harmless, just like his followers.

So where is the evidence of his kingdom, of his reign? I like Star Trek, do you? It's something about me that my wife Sophie just can't understand. Every time I watch it on TV she just shakes her head and leaves the room. I used to like the original series, the one with William Shatner as Captain Kirk, but my real favorite is The New Generation with Patrick Stewart as Captain Jean Luc Picard. That series first aired when I was in seminary. I remember many evenings in the TV room in the basement at Knox College, sitting on those black faux leather couches, watching Picard with his aristocratic Shakespearian accent order tea, Earl Grey, hot from the food replicator and give the order to Data to engage. One of my favorite episodes is called 'The Inner Light.' In this episode Picard is struck by an energy beam from an alien probe which locks on to his brain. While rendered unconscious by the probe, Picard experiences a lifetime in another culture, on a long ago destroyed planet called Kitaan. In this life, Picard is a man named Kaman and he is married to a woman named Aileen, whom he comes to deeply love, and eventually they have two children and grandchildren. Kaman realizes that something is wrong with their planet, that it is dying of drought because of the radiation from the planet's sun. Eventually the leaders of the planet agree that they need to find a way to preserve their history, the memory of their existence. The leaders of Kitaan decide to launch a probe and as a very old Kaman gathers with his family to attend the launching wondering about why he knows nothing about this probe, Kaman is met by his long deceased wife and his best friend, who tell him he knows about the probe, that he's seen it, just before he came to Kitaan. The people of Kitaan hoped that their probe would find someone in the future who would tell others about them. Picard exclaims, oh, it's me, isn't it! I'm the someone... I'm the one it finds. In only 25 minutes, Picard has experienced a lifetime as Kaman on Kitaan and he will be the one whose life will bear witness to the existence of the people of Kitaan.

The evidence of the kingdom of heaven, of the reign of Christ, isn't found in metrics that measure the level of life expectancy or the GDP of nations. It's not measured in empirical data around educational levels or literacy rates. The evidence of the kingdom, of the reign of Christ, is found in us. We are the ones the kingdom finds, and it is our lives and our living, that will bear witness to the truth of the kingdom of heaven in our midst, the reign of Christ under which we live. If we want evidence of the reign of Christ in our midst we need to look nowhere other than at ourselves, at those of us who say we follow Jesus, to see how our discipleship lives out and testifies to the reality and power of Jesus Christ as our King.

The reign of Christ finds its witness in people who are poor in spirit, who recognize our inability to justify ourselves and confess our need for God, which in turn gives us a sense of compassion, kindness and mercy towards others because we have already received that grace from God.

The evidence of the kingdom is found in those people who mourn the brokenness of our world, our own brokenness, and in that mourning act as agents of God's healing and blessing in the world.

The reign of Christ finds expression in us who in our meekness practice kenosis, a self-emptying, giving up what we think we are entitled to so that we can clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts.

Jesus' reign is embodied in those who hunger and thirst for the things of God, for God's justice, mercy, kindness and love, for God's righteousness. It's seen in our commitment to the needs of others, for the sake of those in need.

The kingdom of God is made present as we confess that we have received God's mercy and therefore must show mercy to others. We confess that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness and if we have received that love and faithfulness, we must show that mercy to others, even and especially when it's difficult.

The reign of Christ is seen in those who are pure in heart, who are unalloyed in the devotion of our hearts to Jesus. The reign of Christ is made real by those who are needful of only one thing, to love God with all that we are... and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Evidence of the kingdom of heaven is seen when God's people, when the disciples of Jesus, live as peacemakers, not only peace-lovers or peace-hopers. The kingdom is seen when we don't cross our arms and say, why should I, but instead take the first step of grace to change the nature of our relationships with those with whom we have conflict and to no longer see our opponents as enemies but as those who are also created in the image of God.

And the reign of Christ is seen in this world in those who will follow the way of the one who called and still calls for revolution, for an inversion of the kingdom of this world which believes that all we can see, hold, control or buy is all that there is. In aligning ourselves with the Jesus who bore the scorn of the powerbrokers of his time and who calls us to count as sheer gift, nothing but joy, those times when we are reviled or persecuted or spoken of falsely on his account, we bear witness to the reality of the kingdom of heaven in our midst.

We are the ones the kingdom finds. We are the ones in whom the words of Jesus are lived out and we are the ones whose lives will bear witness to the truth of King Jesus and his reign. Do we want to see evidence of the kingdom of heaven in our midst, of the reign of Christ in our world? We need only to look at the lives of those who say we follow Jesus. It is the lives of those who live with the conviction that this Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came and lived and died among us and who was resurrected and who reigns in glory and who will come again. It is as we live lives committed to the difference that believing in Jesus makes for us that the kingdom is made visible. We are the ones the kingdom finds. Do our lives bear witness to that kingdom?

"Once there was a king who loved his people but did not want to be king. On the day of his coronation, they brought him an ermine robe. "Where did this come from?" he said. "From a royal merchant." "Where did this come from?" "From Persia." "Where did this come from?" "From the skins of small creatures," came the exasperated reply at last. "I cannot wear something made from cruelty to other creatures," said the king. The same questioning happened when the king was given a huge and perfect pearl. The king asked why the pearl was so valuable. "Because of its moonlike shape and luminescent color." "Why?" the king continued to ask. "Because the sixteen male divers died retrieving it from the ocean floor." "How can I accept such cruelty as a gift?" And so it went for the king. He could see the injustice behind so many things but he did not know what to offer in its place. People said he was too kind and gentle to be king. He agreed and one day he just walked away. Disappeared. A group of cruel and greedy knights took over the government. The people's lives became very hard with high taxes and unjust laws.

The king became a tinker, an old word for a tinsmith. He went from town to town helping people keep their knives sharp and selling them pots and pans. He sat in their kitchens and learned from them. He heard all about their joys and sorrows. He was moved by how hard their lives had become because of the cruel knights who ruled the kingdom. And they learned from his intuitive wisdom and his insightful questions about caring for one another with compassion. So it went. The former king was very happy serving the people as a tinker. They often thought he looked familiar, like their rightful king. When they asked if he were a king he would answer with a question, "Do I look like a king?" And he would smile. Years went by. One day the tinker learned that a man's son had died working too long in the heat in the fields of the cruel knights. When he asked how the boy had died at first he was simply told "the heat." He persisted until the boy's father finally cried out, "It was the cruelty of the knights that killed my son! When will we be rid of them?"

"You will," said the tinker. "But how?" the people wanted to know. "You help us see that their ways are unjust. But what can we do about it? You look like our king but you will not tell us if you are. Who will lead us against the knights? How can we fight without swords? We have only farm tools." Then the tinsmith stood and with a loud, clear voice cried out, "Prepare yourselves! You will not need swords. The day is coming soon when you will overthrow the knights. What you will need is long, stout poles of strong wood. Collect as many as possible." And with that he picked up his tinker's tools and went on to the next town.

As he traveled he was accosted by one of the cruelest of the knights. When it was discovered that he was a tinsmith the knight had his soldiers take him by force to the castle where all the ruling knights lived. There he was treated miserably and forced to sharpen all the knights' swords for no pay. The tinker worked hard for three days and with no complaint.

He honed the edge of each sword until each weapon glistened. All the swords were the sharpest they had ever been. When he was finished he was thrown out of the castle with no thanks. And he was told not to go far upon pain of punishment because the knights would require his services often.

When the people saw that the tinker had been thrown violently out of the castle they gathered around to help him. They were very angry at the way he had been treated. But the tinker surprised them. He stood strong before them and with a loud voice commanded them to gather all the people of the kingdom. They were to bring all their long, stout poles. It was time to challenge the cruel rulers. The people were gathered by the next morning with their poles. The tinker stood before them as their leader. "Do not be afraid!" he said. "No matter how large and frightening the knights might seem when they come riding out of the castle, stand firm! Hold your poles with two hands in a strong line above your heads. All will be well!"

Then the tinker gave a loud shout of challenge to the watchmen on the towers of the knights' castle. He challenged the knights to come forth and face the people. The gates of the castle opened and the knights came riding forth on their huge warhorses brandishing their sharpened swords. The sunlight glinted off the polished metal. They rode straight for the people and one by one brought their swords down on the poles held over the peoples' heads. Their swords sliced right through the poles. But as soon as they did the swords shriveled, withered and fell to pieces. You see, the tinker had sharpened them so finely that there was no substance left to hold them together after their final cut through the wooden poles. One by one the knights were disarmed. The people surrounded them, bound them and put them in prison to await trial.

Then they turned to the tinker and begged him to be their king. They were sure now that he was the former king, the kind and gentle king they had missed for so many years. The tinker said, "Yes I am that former king. But I will not take back my throne. We have lived and learned together for so many years that I believe you are wise enough to govern yourselves. Remember justice. Remember compassion. Remember to take care of each person, each creature and the land. Remember forgiveness as you settle your differences. Live in peace." And he turned and walked down a path and into the forest. They never saw him again. The people rebuilt their kingdom and learned to govern themselves with the wisdom of their experiences and the wisdom of the tinker. They dealt justly with the cruel knights putting them to work in helping the poorest of the kingdom. In all the stories the people told their children in the years to come they spoke of their wise and gentle leader of their revolution as was the one who had shaped the life of their kingdom. And they always called him "The Tinker King."

When the teachings of the King live deep in us, when we truly abide by them in our lives and living, we become the best witnesses and evidence for the unveiling of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus begins and ends the Beatitudes with the same promise. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.... Who is it that can promise the kingdom of heaven, who is it that can tell us that heaven is our great reward? Only the one who is truly the King. What Jesus has envisioned will come to be and our living in faith is what it means to be blessed.

Rejoice and be glad, for our King reigns, now and forever, Amen.