

“DEEP WITH CHRIST OUR KING”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Colossians 1:1-20

(11-24-19) CTK

It's the last Sunday of the church year, the Reign of Christ the King. I hadn't planned to begin a sermon on the Reign of Christ by speaking about Don Cherry, but the issue fits so well, so here goes.

If you live in Canada, you'd have to have been living under a rock not to know the national outrage around the comments made by Don Cherry just before Remembrance Day. There's no need to revisit the actual comments themselves, but the outrage that it sparked goes both ways. There are those who are passionate defenders of Cherry, not only his right to speak his mind freely, but also his views about what's happening in our culture. And there are those who are equally passionate critics of Cherry and what they see as his outdated views of culture and his dangerous words that divide and blame. It's ironic that Cherry, who is a hockey commentator, was fired for words that have nothing to do directly with hockey. But there is an indirect connection, one which I don't know that Don Cherry would have been intentional about.

Cathal Kelly, a columnist for the Globe and Mail, wrote this past week that hockey needs to re-examine its place in our country. In response to Don Cherry, Hockey Canada put out the statement that hockey brings our country together, it unites us, not divides us, hockey is for everyone. Well, yes and no.

Hockey can be for everyone, but not everyone plays or is even interested anymore. Yes, there are times when hockey does unite us, who can forget Sidney Crosby's overtime goal in the gold medal game against the Americans at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics? But those moments are more and more rare.

Do you know that it's been 25 years since a Canadian team won the Stanley Cup? The weather here in the lower mainland is too warm to have a lot of outdoor hockey rinks and I don't go to the arenas to know how full they are. I assume that they are full with hockey players of all ages, but I do know that if you drive around Richmond, you'll see kids playing basketball just about every night the weather is warm enough to allow it and if you drive near where I live, you'll know that the city just resurfaced the soccer field next to Hugh Boyd School and it's always full, come rain or shine. Hockey yes, but not only hockey anymore.

You might say, well that's because the people who live in Richmond aren't from the traditional hockey playing cultures and I would say absolutely correct. And that's exactly the point. Can hockey claim to be the great unifier of Canadians when those who are Canadians are no longer united in our passion for it? "We the North," is a slogan, not for hockey, but for basketball in Canada. More and more of our kids are familiar with LeBron James and Kawhi Leonard than they are with Brock Boeser or Bo Horvat.

What's happening with hockey is connected to what Don Cherry was saying, in that the assumptions of the culture, as a hockey playing, hockey loving country

or as a nation united by core convictions about things like Remembrance Day are fading. Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.

You might know that that last sentence is from a poem called “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats. Yeats wrote that poem at the end of the First World War, the Great War as they called it. It was a war that tore apart the assumptions of modernity, that human progress would continue to evolve, ever upward, ever better. But instead, millions of people ended up dying horrible deaths on the battlefields of Europe. Yeats captured that sense of despair and despondency so poignantly in that phrase, things fall apart, the center cannot hold.

The center cannot hold. I think that this captures what seems to be so hard about a lot of things these days. There doesn’t seem to be a center that holds things together. The values we once took for granted, those things that used to define our identity as a nation, as a people, as a culture, they no longer do. Think about some of those things, family, marriage, gender issues, the roles that people inhabited, there no longer seems to be a center, a core. Things like hockey used to hold us together but not so much these days. Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. This is the anxiety that underlies much of our public discussion, whether it be about issues like immigration, economics, liberals vs. conservatives, republicans vs. democrats, there is such polarization that the center just can’t seem to hold. Yeats ends the first stanza of his poem with these words, *“the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity”*. Does that sound like today?

John Toews, a Mennonite Brethren professor in a sermon he wrote 25 years ago, spoke of the difference between two types of worlds, centripetal and centrifugal. A centripetal world is one that has a dominant center; the core is strong and defined. The center keeps things in place, keeps things from flying apart, like gravity or the orbit of the earth around the sun. A centrifugal world is one in which there is no center and forces push everything toward the edges. Toews argued that in the late 60's the center began to give way, and then collapsed. While he wrote of the United States, this analysis would apply to our context as well. We moved away from a centripetal world to a centrifugal world, a world that has no center.¹ And this is true of religion as well.

Many of us here today, especially those of us who are a little older, which is a good description of a typical Presbyterian congregation, we remember those days when faith played a central role in shaping our cultural context. Maybe you went to school when the Lord's Prayer was recited to begin the day. In 1989 both Bible reading and the Lord's Prayer were removed from BC public schools. You may also remember a time when shops were closed on the sabbath and most people, whether they really believed it or not, still held an affiliation with a particular religious tradition, mostly Christian.

But today, not only does the Christian faith play less and less a public role, the faith itself seems conflicted about what the center should be. The polarization we see in the broader culture is reflected as well in the church.

¹ John E. Toews, Moving from Centrifugal to Centripetal. directionjournal.org

Is the center of our faith all about salvation, getting to heaven, or it is about serving others, seeking justice and compassion?

Countless books and articles have been written about how to be more relevant as churches in a culture that seems less and less interested in what we have to offer. Our own Richard Topping, Principal of the Vancouver School of Theology was interviewed recently by the Anglican Journal and provides a critique of the mainline churches attempt to seek relevance by engaging in ways that the culture might pay attention to. Richard says, *when you've been the mainline, you find it difficult to find your own voice apart from the culture. So it's almost like you pull back the bow and try to hit relevance, and you hit redundancy dead center, because you end up not having anything to say that people can't find out from other sources without anything to do with Christianity.*²

If all that the church does is to try to be relevant by seeking to say what the culture around us already says, what's the point? Where's the center?

On this Sunday of the Reign of Christ the King, we would do well to return to scripture. The Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossian church needs to be required reading for our centrifugal world today. In a culture and in a church that seems to be living in a time when things fall apart and where the center cannot hold, the words of scripture point us to a different truth. Paul points us to Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or

² Richard Topping, Anglican Journal, October 29, 2019. anglicanjournal.com

powers, all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Did you hear that? In him, in Jesus, all things hold together. In a world where things fall apart and the center cannot hold, in Jesus, all things hold together. The center, for the Christian, and for the world in which we live, isn't an set of values, it isn't reciting a prayer or playing a game, it isn't wearing poppies on Remembrance Day, although we should, the center is a person, it is the person of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

As I said earlier, Yeats wrote his poem at the end of the World War I, but the anxiety and fear embodied in the idea of things falling apart and the center not holding isn't only tied to one time and place. The phrase, things fall apart, the center cannot hold, was used more by commentators following the election of President Trump than it had been in the 30 years prior. And when Paul was writing to the Christians in Colossae, in what is today modern Turkey, the same fears and anxieties were present. Confused and afraid of the pressures they faced from those who insisted on human tradition and philosophy and the primacy of the elemental spirits of the universe, they turned to things like angel worship and dwelling on visions.

Whatever the source of our lack of center might be, the answer throughout the centuries has been the same, Jesus Christ. What is it about Jesus that makes him the center, what is it about Jesus that in him all things hold together? What is it about Jesus that isn't just what the world can say with better music and richer coffee?

Paul lays it out pretty clearly. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Things fall apart because we can't hold it together, no matter how hard we try. Sooner or later the center will not hold because what we base it on isn't lasting. The central problem of the human condition, the reason why there are and will always be things like wars and corruption and megalomaniacs is that we are a sinful people, we live in darkness, we are faced with a problem that no matter how hard we try, we are powerless to solve. And the central hope of the human condition is the fact that in Jesus Christ, God has made our redemption possible, God has moved us from darkness into the light and has made possible for all the forgiveness of sins. In Jesus Christ, God was pleased to reconcile himself to all things and God has made peace with us through the blood of his cross.

This is not stuff you will find at Starbucks. Human philosophy will tell us that we can work out our own salvation but if the problem is inherent in us, if we ourselves are the problem, then we can't be the solution, it has to come from somewhere else, it has to come from God.

If we as the church and if we as the people of God, as disciples of Jesus, if we are seeking a center in life, if we are wanting something that will hold us together, we need to go deep with Christ our King.

We, as the church and members of it, need to be deeply rooted in knowing who Jesus is for us and for the world. There is only one center and it's not a legalism, not a doctrine or a dogma, it's a person, it's the Son of the Living God, in whom all things hold together.

To go deep with Christ our King means that we will live in ways and embody things that the world will not understand or even accept. If our center, if our core is deeply rooted in Jesus Christ, if our center is held together in the knowledge that in Jesus we have redemption and forgiveness, in him we have been rescued from the power of darkness and been transferred to the light of his kingdom, if in Jesus we know that God has reconciled us to himself and that we are made to be at peace with God, if our center, if our core is strong and certain, we can be so much more gracious and generous at our edges. When we lack a strong center, when we don't have a core that's rooted in anything lasting, we try to protect the margins.

We feel that we can't afford to lose the margins because if we do, then we risk losing everything. That's what leads to the polarization of our culture today. If you lack a center, you fight like mad to preserve the margins. You defend the peripherals because you are afraid of what might happen if you get exposed. There's no room for grace when there's nothing at the center. But if we will be deeply rooted in Jesus our King at our center, our interactions with others at the margins will be very different. We will be a people of forgiveness and mercy, a people of compassion and grace, we will love our enemies, turn the other cheek,

we will do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and even if they don't do unto us what we would want, we will still do to them what we know we should. We won't seek only to win, no matter what the cost, because we know that there is a greater prize which has already been won for us. People with a strong center have lots of room for grace.

The center will hold because it is rooted in someone other than ourselves. The center will hold because our own vulnerabilities and weaknesses will not leave us afraid to risk. For the church, for Christians, to impact and shape our culture, our society, our nation, we need to be a people whose center is deeply rooted in Christ our King. The church continues to have difficult conversations around challenging issues, as we should, but we can only have these conversations if we are first certain of our core, of our center.

If we don't preach Jesus, if we don't proclaim his kingship in the life of the church, if we don't know that the primary message of the gospel is about redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace with God through Jesus Christ, then all the conversations we think we need to have will be misguided and characterized by fear and divisiveness. If we don't preach Jesus and his gospel as a church, there's nothing we can say to our culture that it can't get elsewhere. If you can get the same truth from the Globe and Mail or the New York Times as you can get in scripture, then what's the point of it all?

This centrifugal world of ours needs a community for whom Jesus is the center, who will go deep with Christ as our King. In a world and in a country that is

feeling like its unmoored, uncentered, where things don't seem to be like the way they used to be, the world needs a church and Christians for whom Jesus is our center, who will proclaim reconciliation and love, forgiveness of sin, in the name and by the person of Jesus Christ, who will redeem us from the power of darkness and bring us into his beloved kingdom. Today we mark the reign of Christ, so may we go deep with Christ our King, in whom all things hold together.

And to God be all the glory, now and forevermore, Amen!

***Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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