“If Christ Reigns: Love Wins Over Hate”

Reign of Christ Sunday
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 1:68-79; Colossians 1:11-20;

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Reign of Christ Sunday, November 20, 2016, dedicated to Rick Sayre, our church’s 2016 Lay Leader Award Winner and to all those who have been disenfranchised in our nation and feel even more afraid and alienated now and always to the glory of God!

“If Christ Reigns: Love Wins Over Hate”


We, in the church, count time differently. Today as the sun sets on this year in the church’s cycle, we pause to remember Jesus just before he enters Paradise.

We call today The Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. In the Christian year, we count our years in three cycles – A, B, and C – A is Matthew’s Gospel; B is Mark; Luke is C. Today, Pentecost ends, Luke’s cycle ends and Year C ends on the cross. Year B ended in the Last Judgment. And Year A will end in the argument Pilate has with Jesus, in which Jesus says his kingdom is *not of this world* (so we will meet at the bottom of the cross - same time next year).
All three gospels describe the Reign of Christ.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Capital University Junior, Brittany Daughenbaugh, of Wood County couldn’t sleep on Wednesday night November 9. So, in the early hours of Thursday morning, Brittany got up and decided to go on a Pokémon Go hunt around the campus. Although she saw two men across Francis Street, she paid no attention to them. She was on a trail of a good Pokémon catch. Suddenly the two men were behind her. One was wearing a Trump “Make America Great Again” hat and the other wearing a Trump/Pence sweatshirt grabbed her arm. One of the men said, “Don’t you worry honey, President Trump said this OK.” He then punched in the face and arm. She fell, hit her head on the pavement and blacked out. Bexley police are investigating the report of the attack on Daughenbaugh, a white woman, by two white men in the late teens or 20s.
Brittany’s attack is not the only one reported in the Columbus area. A Muslim motorist who wears a hijab told Columbus police that white driver of a semi-truck accosted her in traffic on Sawmill Road on Friday, November 11 as he got out of his truck, cursing and yelling at her and her children screaming “Go back to your country.” At University of Michigan a woman was forced to remove her hijab after a man threatened to set her on fire. A teacher in Gwinnett County outside Atlanta was told to hang herself with her hajib. (Earl Rinehart, The Columbus Dispatch, Tuesday November 15, 2016, “Metro and State” Section).

As of yesterday, The Southern Poverty Law Center has reported over 700 cases of hate harassment incidents since the election of Donald Trump. While there have been attacks on Trump supporters as well, the incidents have overwhelmingly come from young whites on Muslims, Latinos, Blacks, the LGBTQ community members and women – like Brittany (CBS News, November 19, 2016).

One teacher in our congregation told me yesterday, her “curriculum” has shifted from teaching her assigned materials to simply, holding and consoling her terrified children who fear that they will be send back to Mexico or wherever their families came from. I have certainly witnessed that same terrible truth with the Mosaic High School Students who meet
in our building. They are scared – for themselves and their families and friends. One told me, “I don’t want to see America HATE again.”

In a conversation with two African-American friends (a woman and a man) a few days ago, they both reported that they had each been pulled over “Driving While Black” through Bexley in the days after the election. Each of them is a leader in our community. The officer asked my male Black friend, “Where are headed?” The officer repeated the question another time – as though not believing him – before letting him go.

Late this week, the Justice Department released a report this week that Hate Crimes rose by 6.8% in America in 2015 – most notably as the attacks on the Muslim community spiked. We won’t have statistics for this year until next, but minority communities have felt the rise of hate crimes increasing throughout the election cycle of this year – and even beyond.

Hate. Fear. Anger. Unsolicited attacks. Mockings. Beatings. Slogans of hate which emanated from the mouth of president-elect on the campaign trail have been owned and used freely by his most vicious followers. A rise in un-American, Un-Christian and inhumane actions against people of color, people of different faith expressions and women have absolutely no
place in our nation – especially when they come from the lips of people who call themselves Christians.

As we “gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing” and say “thank you for our family, faith and nation” this Thursday, each one of us in this room needs to tell our families - our children, our grandchildren: **IT IS NEVER OKAY, ACCEPTABLE OR JUST TO SPEAK OR ACT IN HATE AGAINST ANYONE, ANYWHERE, ANYTIME for ANY REASON. NEVER!**

We find this grounding in this belief in our faith in Jesus Christ but it comes home to us in the passion narrative in Luke 23:33-43 this morning. If Christ Reigns, then Love Ultimately Wins over Hate. Well, we have the reign of Christ tested to the max in the passion narrative in Luke. Here Jesus is ridiculed, attacked, beaten, mocked, laughed at and finally brutally executed at the hands of the Roman Empire.

Jesus is declared “king of the Jews” by mocking Roman soldiers and a cynical Roman governor. The mocking title “King of the Jews” is publicly displayed above his head. These words are spit and penned as words of disdain. Yet, as Roman rulers and soldiers ridicule Jesus, they speak more truth than they know.

Luke’s brevity is impressive. He understands that the power of this event does not lie in our flow of tears but in Jesus’ flow of
blood. So, he provides just the essentials. The place of crucifixion is called “The Skull.” The word “crucify” literally means to “to impale a person on a stake.” There, on Skull Hill, Jesus is joined in this public execution by two criminals - one on his left and one on his right. The soldiers who are there on assignment make sport of Jesus (vs. 36-37). The leaders who are present mock Him with two titles - Messiah and the Chosen One. They sneer, “He helped others, let him help himself if he is Christ of God, the Chosen One.” The crowd is there, too. They have been with Jesus all along but now they watch him in silence, apparently feeling helpless before the combined powers of the state and religion. Luke will later say that Jesus' acquaintances from Galilee, including the women, watched from a distance. While he dies his followers step back in fear. Not a good sign.

Twice Luke turns our attention to the ones on the crosses. The first time is to hear Jesus' words of forgiveness, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” The “they” in Jesus’ prayer covers all who are implicated in his death. The second time our attention is drawn to the cross is let us overhear the conversation among the crucified. One criminal joins the mockers. The other does not, acknowledging the justice of his punishment and the injustice of that of Jesus. Jesus never responds to the words of rebuke from the one man. His words
of forgiveness have already covered his response to all of this, including this new hate. But to the man who says to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus says, “So be it…today you will be with me in paradise.”

Three times Jesus is mocked to “Save himself.” When he acts, he does save. But he saves not himself but the other man. That the one saved is a dying criminal is fully congenial to the type of persons blessed by Jesus throughout his ministry. Jesus continues his ministry until his dying breath. As Luke writes in 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.”

In death, as in life, Jesus stays true to himself. Just before paradise we see Jesus as he always was - compassionate, fully aware of the other, forgiving, non-judgmental in the face of abuse, in love with the world even as the world hates.

You and I can learn everything we really need to know about living a loving life and overcoming hate from attending to Jesus’ dying words and actions. As his followers, we are called to forgive everyone of everything. We are called to be graceful instead of spiteful. We are called to live into this truth - love wins over hate. We are called to be kind rather than judgmental. We are called to respond with love no matter what another person spits at us - verbally or literally - we can treat it as a gift rather than the truth. We are called to welcome even
the most despicable characters into the embrace of God’s love and grace. We are called to live life until the last breath, and with our dying breath to commend ourselves into God’s hands rather than condemn anyone into the halls of Hell.

Colossians 1:11-20 teaches us that the one we are called to follow is actually the greatest image of the living God. Speaking to a persecuted Church, Colossians 1:11-20 is a hymn of praise to God in Christ. It sings of Christ's kingship and power. Christ is presented as “the image of the invisible God” (vs. 15). He is “the firstborn of all creation” - not the first thing to be created, but rather the one with preeminent rank. He is God’s agent in creation – “for in him all things on heaven and earth were created” (vs. 6). Before all things came into being, Christ was present (vs. 17). And “in him all things hold together” (vs.17). Christ is the super glue that holds our family pictures in the aging photo album of the Christian story!

While the rubber cement of yesteryear may cause the disintegration of former photos, Christ glues all things together! He is “the head of the body, the church” (vs. 18). As head over all creation, he is not only the firstborn of creation, but also the firstborn from the death (vs. 18). “In him,” Paul writes, “God is in all God's fullness chose to dwell” (vs. 18). Reconciliation comes through him (vs. 20). On the cross love wins! Peace is made between God and the world.
What a glorious God we worship! What an amazing Christ reigns! We see that all things work together for good - IN CHRIST! In the world in which we live, I believe we need Jesus Christ more now, than ever before. Our Christ, whom we need, is a God of love and not hate; a God of embrace and not rejection. A God who forgives and never mocks. A God who is integral in defense of ALL Creatures great and small, not a God who could care less about creation and the balance of life on this planet. Our God in Christ is one who holds all things together. He is the loving, living superglue for reconciliation and love for humanity and creation.

And we who claim this Christ as our light, our love and our life better pay close attention to others beyond our faith – especially those with NO Faith claims whatsoever. They will become our teachers and our witnesses to the truth of our own faith calling to LOVE! At the foot of the cross, just after Jesus’ last breath and just before his bloodied body is taken down to be laid in the tomb, the non-believing Roman Centurion guard says, “Certainly, this person was righteous.” Or in the translation of Eugene Peterson in The Message, “his man was innocent! He was a good man, and innocent!”

Does Christ reign? Yes – he does!

So love wins over hate!
So, give thanks and praise to Christ – the Leader of Love who triumphs over hate. And then – follow him by doing the same! Amen.

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