

“A Vow of Kindness”

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, the last Sunday of Pentecost, Reign of Christ, November 20, 2022, dedicated on this World Remembrance Day to all victims of traffic accidents, to all Transgender people who suffer persecution, to all the innocent victims at Club Q in Colorado killed and wounded on Saturday night as they danced and were slaughtered in the latest mass shooting and hate crime, to my youngest daughter, Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens Stadie on her 27th birthday and to her beautiful daughter Hazel Elizabeth Sitler Stadie born on October 22 and always to the glory of God!

“A Vow of Kindness”

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

We in the church count time differently than others – although every single world religion counts time differently than others. We call today, The Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the church year.

In the Christian year, as follow standard readings called a lectionary, 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 engages an argument between Pilate and Jesus, but in all honesty, Jesus isn’t arguing, he is silent as Pilate declares the kingdom of the world to be his. All three describe the Reign of Christ.

No matter what cycle we are in, A, B, or C, we will meet at the foot of the cross next year in Jerusalem on this very same day.

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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.

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This is such a time of seasonal transition in so many ways. The leaves have all fallen. The harvest is in. The days darken swiftly now. The first snow has blown across Ohio (and has buried north western New York and Buffalo – prayers for them).

As you pass through neighborhoods, you might see what I saw last week. One house had Halloween decorations mixed with a larger thanksgiving blow-up Turkey and the Grinch stealing Christmas all displayed together. If you feel confused, consider this, none of these seasonal transitions matter if you bleed Scarlet and Gray and you are a Buckeye fan – because The Week is Holy Week for us. This is THE Game week, with The Game, and by Saturday at noon, anyone, anywhere who cares anything about college football will be watching our young Buckeyes win in our 100 year old Ohio Stadium – a stadium built by the same man who built First Church. But I am getting ahead of myself. After all that is almost 144 hours away and whose counting? No really, who is counting? Raise your hands! Both hands – O-H-I-O!

Winter is upon us and for us, the cycle of Christian readings has gone round as well. Christ's Reign is upon us as his dying time has come

round again, too. The year's ending and His ending – our ending – is the violent ending of the execution of our King.

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. Because Christ Reigns, Love Ultimately Wins over Hate. Because Christ Reigns, Kindness wins over Unkindness.

The victory all goes to God! All of the glory goes to God!

In the words of Jesus to his disciples in the Beatitudes, he says it succinctly and prophetically, in Matthew 5:11-12: *“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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

However reviling persecution utters its evil words, we have now reached the lowest point as the reign of Christ is tested to the max in the passion narrative in Luke. Here Jesus is ridiculed. He's attacked. He's beaten. He's mocked. He's laughed at. And finally, he is brutally executed at the hands of the Roman Empire.

Jesus is declared “king of the Jews” by mocking Roman soldiers and a cynical Roman leaders. The mocking title “King of the Jews” is publicly displayed above his head. These words are spit and penned as words of disdain and hate. Yet, as the leaders 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 the flow of our tears but in the flow of Jesus' blood. So, Luke provides just the essentials. The place of crucifixion is called “The Skull.” The word “to 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 leaders who are present mock Him with two titles – Messiah and the Chosen One. Those are titles set apart by God as distinctive. Not to be mocked. They sneer, *“He helped others, let him help himself if he is Christ of God, the Chosen One.”* The soldiers who are there on assignment, follow those leaders and play sport of Jesus (vs. 36-37). The crowd is there, too. They have supposedly been with Jesus all along but now they turn on him and become “the silent majority” as they watch him and say not a word while he is crucified. Maybe they feel 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. Whatever the case, while Jesus is executed, his followers silently retreat in fear. It’s never a good sign when people abandon their leader, especially one who has given his entire life to teaching, healing and compassionate care and kindness – the one who is in fact, “the Chosen One.”

Twice Luke turns our attention to the two other men being crucified on the crosses beside Jesus – one on his left and one on his right. The first time, Luke shares Jesus’ words of forgiveness, *“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”* But actually, the Hebrew and the Greek are interesting – because the “they” in this prayer are the two men on either side. But the “they” in Jesus’ prayer ends up covering all who are implicated in his death. The second time our attention is drawn to the cross brings us in close as we 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. He never answers. He never says one word. His words of forgiveness have already covered his response to all of this, including this new hate that has been dumped on him. But to the man who says to Jesus, *“Remember me when you come into your kingdom,”* Jesus utters almost his last words from the cross, *“So be it...today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

Three times Jesus is mocked to “Save himself” and he does not save himself. When he acts, he does save. But he saves not himself, rather he saves the other man. That the one saved is a dying criminal is fully aligned 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 is hating on him. We see him as Kind. In fact, his promise of salvation to the criminal in a vow of kindness – “I promise you...today you will be with me in paradise.”

You and I can learn everything we really need to know about living a loving life and overcoming hate from simply attending to Jesus’ dying words and actions. We can learn everything we need to know as his followers from his vow of kindness. As his followers, each and every one of us is called by God to forgive everyone of everything. Each and every one of us is called by God to be graceful instead of spiteful. Each and every one of us is called by God to be kind rather than cruel. Each and every one of us is called by God 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. It is their truth

but it's not the truth. Each and every one of us is called by God to live into the truth that love wins over hate.

Each and every one of us is called by God to welcome even the most despicable characters into the embrace of God's love and grace. Each and every one of us is called by God to live life until our last breath, and with our dying breath to commend ourselves into God's hands rather than condemn anyone into the halls of Hell.

None of these things are optional.

At the foot of the cross, while Jesus draws his last breath and we close this year dedicated to life in his care, we need to get this one right.

Colossians walks us into Paradise with a beautiful hymn of praise given as a gift to the early church facing persecution and death. Colossians 1:11-20 is very clear – the one we are called to follow is actually the greatest image of the living God. 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). He is under the rocks of time – if you will. 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." He is "the head of the church" (vs. 18). As head over all creation, he is not only the firstborn of creation, but also the

firstborn from 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). Again – and forever, on the cross – love wins! Peace is made between God and the world.

Today, let’s not be fooled by the title of this day – The Reign of Christ. The title is really cool. It’s superlative. The images we typically create for it are flush with symbols of royalty and high priesthood; greatness and grandeur. But, as Christians, we don’t live in a fairy tale world. Luke’s Gospel reflects none of that. Today’s Gospel portrays an apparently impotent Christ: defeated in the eyes of the world and dying in the sight of a God who is not pulling him off the cross.

If we ask which of these images, the royal or the shattered, better reflects Christ, we must choose the one from the Scriptures rather than one we make up because it looks better, and feels better and sings better than the rest.

As we think about the Christian message, especially on a day like today, it’s too easy to fall into a fairy tale mode and recall that Christ the King lives happily-ever-after story. This flies in the face of the Scriptures. It strips Jesus’ death of its depth and risks portraying his love as shallow as that of a prince enchanted by a beautiful princess. After all, Jesus is not Prince Charming and this is not Snow White.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, when we rejoice in our King of the Universe, let us remember the real Jesus: Rejected and mocked – powerless to stop the violence. Let us remember that he reigned through active love, that he reigned through active compassion, that he reigned through active kindness even as he suffered unto death. When God raises him, even though he is born again, he carries

the marks of his suffering. It was His love that reigned then and continues to reign today.

Our faith insists that love is the only power in the Universe that is capable of overcoming evil. As living images of our God, it is that love and that alone that we are called to remember and make present again. So, let's take the vow of kindness today and follow the Risen Christ in everything we do and say. Amen.

