

The Paradise Paradox
A sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 20, 2022

Please Read:
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

“Today you will be with me in Paradise” is one of the strangest statements of Jesus on the cross. In a matter of hours, Jesus would be dead, along with the criminals on either side of him. We have the benefit of knowing that death is not the end of the story for Jesus, but his talk of Paradise must have sounded delusional at the time. The crowds gawked, the leaders scoffed, the soldiers mocked Jesus and taunted him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” So, the question is, why is this an appropriate text for *Christ the King*, or *Stewardship Dedication* Sunday?

Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new feast day in the church calendar. It was Pope Pius IX who in 1925 declared the last Sunday of the liturgical year to be “Christ the King” Sunday.¹ Think about it. We have church members older than this holiday! Historically, the church wanted to affirm the sovereignty of Christ especially then. Mussolini had been head of Italy for three years, Adolf Hitler had been out of jail for a year, his Nazi party was growing in popularity, and the world lay in a Great Depression. Pius IX asserted that, nevertheless, Christ is “King of the universe.” The feast became the church's great nevertheless to the godlessness and cynicism of the modern world. Despite the dictators, the tyrants and political bullies of the day, despite the popular notion that religion is a “private affair,” despite global instability and wars and injustices, Christ the King Sunday continues to be a declaration of the good news that *nevertheless* Jesus is Lord “and he shall reign forever and ever: King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!”

But here’s the thing... Despite the new Monarch in England, King Charles III, kings have gone out of fashion. They represent a kind of power that is not only dominating and oppressive, but a power often enforced by military force and violence. Kings are at the top of a long hierarchical food chain, with most people at the bottom, and not always happily so. This is the human understanding of a King and why Jesus was mocked as a King. He appeared to be utterly powerless. Kings were supposed to save the Kingdom, but Jesus couldn’t even save himself.

What Paradise was he talking about then, when he assured his fellow victims of the brutal power of Rome that they would be with him that same day in Paradise?

¹ Pope Pius IX declared the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar to be Christ the King Sunday in the encyclical entitled, *Quas Primas*).

It's a paradox at best, but today we declare the good news that God's love is stronger than death, that God's power is revealed in what appears to be weakness. Forgiveness from the cross.... Just at that moment Jesus is revealing God's ultimate power, what C.S. Lewis calls the *deeper magic* of self-giving love.

Rather than returning evil for evil, rather than meeting violence with violence, rather than having a stronger King who will dominate a weaker King, God is revealing in Jesus a new way toward forgiveness and healing love. Paradise peaks through the senseless violence of this world whenever someone chooses to let go of eye for an eye retribution or power domination.

Miroslav Volf suggests another biblical metaphor for the Kingdom of God. He prefers "The Home of God," the title of one of his recent books. Marx and Nietzsche, among others, have decried Christian faith for being a poisonous dream, misdirecting our longing from our home in this world to an eternal, ghostly one. But the biblical vision, from Genesis through to the Revelation, asserts God has determined to make God's home with us here on planet earth and with all creation. Part of that divine invasion means absorbing into Godself our violent tendencies. Instead of retributive or punitive justice, God has chosen restorative justice, aligning as Jürgen Moltmann suggests, with all of the victims of injustice in the world, and showing the way of forgiveness and self-giving love.

I invite you to think about the possibilities with this metaphor of God coming to dwell among us, full of grace and truth, and that we – along with all people - are welcome members of the household of God; that hospitality is central to Christian faith. Making space and welcoming others, even our enemies, is a counter-intuitive act, but presents another way forward than simply perpetuating the age-old cycles of *quid pro quo* and the see-saw back and forth of power politics.

Perhaps that's one reason why Thanksgiving is one of our favorite holidays. Its origins go back to the year 1621 when the Wampanoag first nation people shared a feast with the Pilgrims. It was formerly instituted in 1863 during the Civil War when President Lincoln called the country to prayerfully give thanks for all our blessings. Thanksgiving happens around a table with lots of good food, but it's often a time when we step back and take stock of the many blessings we have received. It's a time to welcome friends and family, and sometimes strangers and even enemies to share the grace of hospitality.

Lord knows we need to find another way. We live in a violent culture. The shooting in an LGBTQ bar in Colorado Springs, the shooting at the University of Virginia and the stabbings at the University of Idaho have sadly become commonplace. Thank God the mid-terms are over, and we are back to the political checks and balances our founding fathers intended, but the violence has moved into the political sphere. The *New York Times* reviewed more than 75 indictments of people charged with violently threatening lawmakers in the past six years and a sickening new trend: more and more Americans have taken ideological disagreements to a new level, threatening violence against members of Congress. “The threats have come in almost every conceivable combination: Republicans threatening Democrats, Democrats threatening Republicans, Republicans threatening Republicans.”² No matter your party affiliation or political inclination, this spike in violence and violent rhetoric is beyond disturbing — it is not the way it’s supposed to be.

In her book *Trauma and Grace*, Serene Jones writes that trauma, or a “wound” inflicted by “a hostile external force that threatens to destroy you ... [can] terrorize an entire community, even those to whom the violence doesn’t happen directly.” The brutal violence of Roman crucifixion clearly traumatized entire communities, much like, as James Cone highlighted in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, how lynchings traumatized Black communities. Crucifixions, like lynchings, were brutalities meant not just to punish the people who were killed, but to terrorize, humiliate and shame the communities from which those people came.

When we experience the annihilation of another, our brains simply can’t process the violence. A space is created, Jones says, that “holds horrendous things that affect people’s entire bodies, the way they move and exist in the world.” That entrenched bodily and psychological trauma is passed down from generation to generation. To bring this wound to “verbal expression and public awareness,” Jones writes, is the first step towards healing.

“The power of the cross,” she states, “is not about *valorizing* trauma, which the church has too often done, but about *exposing* trauma.” Jesus is fully traumatized by the crucifixion but resists annihilation of his own humanity. He is humble even in the face of humiliation. He is loving and forgiving, even while being attacked by hate and vengeance. He is betrayed but refuses to betray in return. Somehow, from the violence of the cross, Jesus looks at humanity in the face of all our inhumanity,

² Catie Edmondson, “Threats Batter Lawmakers in One Ugly Call After Another,” (*New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2022), Section A, Page 13.

and still sees us as worthy of love, still sees what is good and possible within us, and prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

That is why the universe changed 2,000 on Calvary. God in Jesus on the cross reveals that ultimate power is forgiveness, self-giving love.

So, I hope as we enjoy our Thanksgiving celebrations around the table, especially this year, we will choose to create space for the other, those who are different from us, those with whom we disagree, those loved ones from whom we may have felt alienated in recent years for whatever reason. It’s not that we ignore the truth of the traumatic violence and injustice of this world, but that speaking the truth in love and showing forgiveness and love towards those around us, especially our families, neighbors, and our enemies is the way forward.

This week is a blur, from *Christ the King* to *Thanksgiving* and then to the First Sunday of Advent, when we anticipate Christ’s birth. The story of Christ’s death on the cross is not the full story, thanks be to God! New life, resurrection new life, will soon be celebrated. The truth that surfaces on the cross, of our inhumanity and our trauma, must be acknowledged and brought to light, but then, something new may emerge; cycles of violence may be broken, traumatic wounds healed.

Friends, as we walk forward later in our service, and as we sit around the table this Thanksgiving, I invite you to reflect on the many blessings you have received in your life and as a community. We are abundantly blessed. But as we come forward, please also take this opportunity to rededicate your life to a better way. Walk forward as a way of saying *I choose the way of the cross and Jesus’ self-giving love*. We come forward under the cross and before the table, because paradoxically, these symbols reveal both the painful and disturbing truth of our humanity, but also signals the way towards God’s Paradise of welcome, forgiveness and new life for all.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.