

Epiphany 4C 2022 Sermon, Stewardship Sunday

Luke 4:21-30

Jesus began to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

I used to dread having to preach on Stewardship Sunday, for it seemed to me that Stewardship Sunday was about convincing people to give of their hard-earned money toward the church's budget. And I knew quite well that the lion's share of the budget for most small churches, like ours, is the salary and benefits for a fulltime priest.

I no longer dread preaching on Stewardship Sunday; because I now understand that, as our Diocesan Canon for Evangelism told our Vestry at our Retreat in October, people don't give to a budget, they give to a cause. We give to a cause.

Now, I'm aware that Christians and seekers attend church for different reasons. Many come searching for Something or Someone beyond themselves, a Transcendent Reality beyond the petty-mindedness and tawdriness and self-serving deceitfulness of much of our world. Some come to church to experience a quietness and centeredness amidst the noise and distractions of our daily lives. Some come for the sense of reverence, devotion, and holiness amidst an ill-mannered, secular society. Some come seeking a welcoming, accepting, and loving community amidst a sometimes lonely and apathetic world. Some come for the beauty of the music or the stained glass. Some come for Holy Communion. Some come for the comforting predictability of the liturgy amidst a world of ever-mounting change that is happening at a dizzying pace. Some come hoping for healing of hurts and wounds and griefs.

Some people come to church because they are tired of the dualistic us-vs.-them, I'm-right-you're-wrong divisiveness and acrimony which seem to permeate the very air we breathe in our country. They come to church to be reminded that we are all part of one humanity, one Creation. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians,

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” If Paul were writing today, he might say, “There is no longer Republican or Democrat, there is no longer pro-vaccine or anti-vaccine, there is no longer American or Russian or Chinese or Iranian, there is no longer gay or straight, Christian or Muslim or Atheist; for all are one in Christ Jesus.”

But the image of a world where dualistic divisiveness and discord is done away with is so foreign to how a majority of people today view the world that it almost seems like a fairy tale, a “pie in the sky by-and-by” vision. And I must admit, it's easy to say, but hard to put into practice – at least it is for me! For it goes against our innate tendency to compare, separate and judge: us vs. them; good or bad; I like this, I don't like that (as if what I like or dislike is of any eternal importance!) Richard Rohr writes, “Dualistic thinking is the well-practiced pattern of knowing most things by comparison. And for some reason, once you compare or label things (that is, ‘judge’ them), you almost always conclude that one is good and the other is less good or even bad.”¹

My friends, for decades I couldn't understand that story in Genesis where God tells Adam and Eve they must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen. 2:17) Isn't it a **good** thing that we know the difference between good and evil? *Objectively*, yes! There **are** some actions that are inherently, objectively evil – torture or murder, for instance – and it is only right that we acknowledge them as evil. But what ends up happening, all too often, is that we see the whole world through the lens of “good” or “evil.” We go around labeling **everything** as good or bad, right or wrong, our group vs. their group, what I like or what I don't like, and on and on. We look out at the world and don't see the gift of what **is**; we see what we judge as lacking or bad or wrong or “that which is *other* than me and my group.”

And the frightening thing is that many Christians honestly believe that what *they* see as good, **Jesus** sees as good; what *they* see as bad, **Jesus** sees as bad. And there are, of course, ample Bible quotes that can be cherry-picked to support *any* assertions. John van de Laar writes, “Like the people of Nazareth [in today's Gospel], there are still those who seek to ‘own’ Jesus for themselves. By domesticating Jesus, and editing his message to fit our national, corporate, or religious agendas, we tame the Gospel, and make it palatable, with little cost [to us]. But, as the people of Nazareth discovered, Jesus will not be tamed, and his grace, while offered to all, also challenges all that resists grace... it is all too easy to seek to bring Jesus and his Gospel into service of our own desires and agendas.”² And, of course, once we have done that, we see ourselves as divinely justified in our judgments and biases and condemnations of other individuals or groups.

And yet, some people come to church because they have become aware that they are missing something deeply important in life. There is an inner hunger, deep in

the soul, for returning to our Source, our Creator, Redeemer, Life-sustainer. Some 1500 years ago, St. Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.”³ We are restless until we can return to that one, common Source of all life, be we Republican or Democrat, black or white, gay or straight, immigrant or native, employed or unemployed. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in that Divine, Loving, and Forgiving Parent whose children we all are, making all humans siblings, one of another. And that state of being, that consciousness wherein all of Creation manifests the loving interrelatedness, shared life, and inter-dependency which is the very DNA of the universe, that restored state of being Jesus calls the Kingdom or Reign of God.

And if we search deeper within ourselves, I think that *that* is what everyone, at the core of their being, longs for: to live within the Kingdom, the Reign, the Sovereignty of our infinitely loving God. You *know*, at the core of your being, that your life is not about you, but rather you are a part of something much greater: the Reign of God becoming manifest, if ever so slowly, in our lives, our community, our world. The Kingdom of God, wherein there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, Democrat or Republican, American or Chinese, worthy or unworthy. All are children of One God, siblings one of another, citizens of God’s kingdom come on earth.

And in the end, *that’s* why I no longer dread preaching on Stewardship Sunday: because it is all about God’s Kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. Asking you to pledge to Christ Church is giving you the opportunity to put your resources at the disposal of God’s Kingdom becoming more and more manifest on earth, wherein the coin of the Realm is not comparison but compassion; not dualistic tribalism, but unitive community.

And, my friends, I see it happening here within Christ Church! I see the transformative love of God becoming manifest, more and more, within this church community. You care for each other, and you reach out beyond the walls of this building to people who are different from you, but whom you nonetheless **know** are your sisters and brothers. I see you seeking to let go of your false self, your ego self, striving, instead, to live from your true self, who you are in God. I see you realizing that what Jesus said is true: the Kingdom of God is within you; and rather than seeing yourself as better than others, as being right where others are wrong, as trusting your ego to be in control of your life, I see you trusting God, opening yourself to the flow of Christ’s life and love flowing through you and into the lives of others.

And I am so grateful to be part of this Christ Church family. Thank you for your courage in allowing your worldly mind to be transformed into the mind of Christ; for saying, with the Virgin Mary, “Let it be to me according to your word;” and for saying, with Jesus, “Thy will, not mine, be done.”

This is why we pledge. We don't pledge to a budget; we pledge because we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And we want to be part of the answer to that prayer.

AMEN

1 Richard Rohr's daily email meditation, June 29, 2015 <https://cac.org/growing-contemplative-seeing-2015-06-29/>

2 <https://sacredise.com/epiphany-4c/>

3 from Augustine's *Confessions*