

November 22, 2020

“Two Sunday Messages”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Philippians 3:10-16; John 18:33-37

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Lucky you! Go ahead and settle in and get yourself another cup of coffee. Because today I'm actually going to deliver two messages. You see, today is Christ the King Sunday, which is celebrated in churches throughout Christendom, but also this week, we celebrate one of our country's most important holidays, Thanksgiving. So let's get started, first with Thanksgiving.

Last Saturday, John and I played tourist and went up to Plymouth to walk around the town and take in the sights. Of course, we saw the Plymouth Rock, and some protestors I might add, which I'll get to momentarily, and we toured the newly refurbished Mayflower. When you tour that ship and hear the story of the Pilgrim's journey to America, you come away with a new understanding as to the ordeal they went through, and a new respect for what they accomplished. Four hundred years ago, 102 of them began a sixty-six day journey across the Atlantic Ocean. A year later, in 1621, less than half of them had survived. Yet it was through their grit and determination that the very foundation of our great nation was built. And for that we should be very thankful. But relatively recently, there has been a note of protest over Thanksgiving. That coming from our American Indian brethren, many who feel they have nothing to be thankful for given all the injustices they have suffered over the years at the hands of the white man. So what are we to do? Well, first let's re-examine the Thanksgiving story briefly.

Philip Deloria is Professor of History at Harvard, and he writes that the first Thanksgiving was not a “thanksgiving” as we now observe it. Instead he says, “The Pilgrims called it a “rejoicing.” A rejoicing featured feasting and drinking, but also militia drills, target practice, and contests of strength and speed. It was essentially a party. The Indians there were Wampanoags, led by Massasoit. Apparently, the Pilgrims did not extend an invitation to their Indian neighbors, rather, the Wampanoags just showed up. And it was not simply four or five of them sitting at a table, as is often depicted in paintings. Massasoit arrived with ninety men - almost double the entire population of the Plymouth Colony. Wampanoag tradition suggests that the group was in fact an army, honoring a mutual defense pact they had negotiated with the Pilgrims the previous spring. You see, the Wampanoag population had been decimated by an epidemic and they were concerned about being overtaken by the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island, and they wanted an alliance with the Pilgrims. So they came, not to enjoy a multicultural feast, but to help the Pilgrims if needed, because hearing repeated gunfire, they assumed

that the Pilgrims were under attack. They arrived and after a long moment of suspicion, the two peoples recognized one another and spent the next three days together.¹ The diary of Pilgrim leader Edward Winslow confirms this. He wrote, “Our harvest being gotten in... among other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming among us, and among them, their greatest king, Massasoit, with some 90 men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted.” However, from that moment on, it seems that things between the Pilgrims and the Indians deteriorated.

So how are we to look at Thanksgiving today? Well, as Christians, there are two things I think we need to consider and reflect on. First and foremost, Thanksgiving is intended to be all about the virtue of gratitude. Gratitude to our Almighty God. According to the famous Roman orator, Cicero, gratitude is not only the greatest of all the virtues, but the parent of them all. And think about that. For out of gratitude flows joy and contentment, and humility and love. You know, despite our troubles, and all the issues going on around us, I know that each and every one of us has something, no several things, to be grateful for. The Pilgrims had many troubles, and very little in the way of ‘things,’ but they still rejoiced in what they did have. You see, an attitude of gratitude can change our thinking, give us a better perspective and make us feel more positive emotionally, acknowledging life's goodness. Now I know this year the pandemic has caused many of us to change how we will celebrate Thanksgiving. Gatherings are smaller or non-existent, trips are postponed or cancelled, and fear and anxiety over the virus has affected us in such a way that we can easily become depressed, feeling more negative emotionally. But there is a cure for that. It is the vaccine of gratitude that we need in order to stay healthy in body and mind, to shift our focus from our difficulties to God, knowing that we are not alone, that whatever we are going through will pass, and that we will eventually emerge victorious. That's why I want to remind us all of Psalm 100. *Worship the Lord with gladness. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that has made us and we are his. Give thanks to him. For the Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations.* May we all have an attitude of gratitude this Thanksgiving and always.

Now secondly, considering the current culture, I think all of us would agree that injustices against not only the American Indian, but against all people of color have, regrettably been a part of our American saga and history. As a people, we have made mistakes, missed opportunities, and failed in the few noble efforts we have attempted to fix these problems. And that can leave all parties feeling

¹ *The Invention of Thanksgiving*, by Phillip Deloria

discouraged and disheartened and even angry. So how do we move forward? Well obviously we have to continue in our resolve to right these wrongs. But as to how we live with our failures of the past and the injustices we've inflicted on each other, let me quote the late African American theologian and preacher Rev. Peter Gomes who states, "We are children of a God who is loving and forgiving, who hates the sin, but loves the sinner. So we are to be thankful that we are children of the God of a 'second chance.' It is God's forgiveness of our humanity and our forgiveness of our fellow humans that makes this process work. And so forgiveness between God and man, and between man and man, should really be the true context of our Thanksgiving holiday." And that's what today's passage from Philippians was really all about. Christ died for the sins of the world and we are a forgiven people. So as Christians we are to learn from the past, but we are not to be chained by our past mistakes. We move forward knowing that we carry Christ's forgiveness with us, as individuals and as a people. But we also move forward toward perfection – working for justice, for understanding, for equality, for all. As St. Paul said, "Brothers and Sisters, I have not achieved perfection. But one thing I focus on: forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead." And what lies ahead is the goal of perfection, that upward call of Jesus Christ. As individuals and as a people we should aspire toward this goal when it comes to love of our neighbor and the elimination of all injustices. Can I get an Amen. Amen!

Now let's talk about Christ the King. As I said, today throughout Christendom, Christ is proclaimed as King. But you know what I find ironic? The Old Testament prophets referred many times to the coming of a king, a Messiah, but there are only two places in the Gospels where Jesus is called by the title of king. At the very beginning of his life by the Magi, and at the very end of his life during his trial and at his execution. And it was Pontius Pilate who declared Jesus' kingship publicly to the world. That happened when Pilate placed a sign on the cross of a scourged and dying Jesus. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The Roman governor meant it as a taunt. But in the three major languages of that time and place, Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, those words spread like wildfire throughout the world. People heard them, and Pilate, unwittingly, effectively became the first great evangelist, as he himself proclaimed Christ as King.²

So let's go back again to that scene in today's scripture where a condemned Jesus stands before the proud Pontius Pilate, who sneeringly asks, "So, you are a King?" And Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not from here." No, Jesus' kingdom is not from here. Not from here, where Pilate, and men like him,

² Jesus of Nazareth, Robert Barron

can only rule because of the strength and power of Caesar's legions.³ No, Christ's kingdom is not from here, where we are all subject to the human condition and it sometimes appears that God has given Satan too long a leash. But that's exactly why Christ left his heavenly kingdom and came into the world. He came not to observe, but to be a very part of the suffering and sorrow and troubles that each of us go through. He subjected himself to the cruelty and injustice and evil of this world. He wept, he was hungry, he was humiliated, he was threatened, he was hated. And then he was crucified and he died. And the kings of this world thought they had won. But we all know who the final victor was. Because he rose! No worldly power could defeat Christ our King and his heavenly kingdom. For it is a kingdom where love and compassion and mercy reign supreme. It is a kingdom where joy and peace is a way of life. It is a kingdom where guilt and shame and sin are wiped away. And, it is a kingdom that Christ can bring here on earth as it is in heaven. Even now, through you and me, if we just follow this King of Kings. So as I do every Christ the King Sunday, let me remind us once again of the greatness and majesty of the one King we need to follow.

Jesus Christ – is the Messiah – the Savior – Emmanuel, God with us. He is the Word made flesh – the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is Wonderful Counselor – Mighty God – Everlasting Father – and the Prince of Peace. He is the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end – the resurrection and the life. He is the great I AM. He is the bread of life – the living water – the good shepherd – the light of the world – the sacrifice for our sins – the true vine to which we cling – the cornerstone of our faith and the gate through which we are saved. He is the way – the truth – the life – He is the judge of the living and the dead. He is the author of our life, the source of our hope and the deliverer of our souls. He is the Lamb of God, He is Lord of all, the King of heaven, and He is the Head of the Church.

He is our redeemer – our rock – our righteousness – our advocate – our protector and our friend. He is salvation to the sinner – eyes to the blind – ears to the deaf – compassion to the hurting – companion to the lonely and strength to the weak. His love knows no bounds – his peace passes all understanding – his mercy goes beyond measure and in Him our joy is made complete. He is the one who calms our storms – dries our tears – heals our wounds – relieves our fears – forgives our sins and renews our soul. He is unparalleled – unprecedented – unmatched - unsurpassed. He is indescribable – incomparable – irresistible – irreplaceable. He stands alone in history – he is the doctrine of true theology – he is the mind no man can grasp. He is Christ the King. Christ the King! And to him be the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever and ever. Amen, and Amen!

³ Collected Sermons of Will Willimon, "Who's In Charge Here?"