

Coherence

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The Reign of Christ
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Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

“[A]nd in him, all things hold together.” -- Colossians 1:17

If someone were to ask you, “Why are you a Christian?” what would you say? I suspect that most of us who attend churches like this one don't often discuss with others why we're Christians. It may sound a little too touchy-feely or evangelical, or it may be something we don't have a good answer for because we don't spend much time reflecting on our faith or on our lives in general.

This morning, as we end one church year and prepare to welcome another in the season of Advent, I'd like to invite you to make a new year's resolution that might make the coming year a little better for you than the year that's passing away. I'd like to invite you to make time in each of the days God gives you next year for reflection. Not Bible study, although I'm always in favor of that, and not devotions that someone else prepares for you. Reflection – reflecting on your own life in its variety and its details, and the various ways you are in the world.

Now I know that some of you are already doing this, and I hope you're finding it a worthwhile spiritual exercise. Others of you, I'm sure, would like to make such time a regular part of life, but you just can't seem to find the time. Well, I've got some good news and bad news about that. The good news is that all of us have plenty of time in any given day for reflection. The bad news is that you can't find it; you have to make it. We don't find time for anything; we make time for everything. How we use our time isn't something that just happens to us; it's a series of decisions we make every day, and even if we have to work long hours following other people's orders or caring for loved ones or meeting other responsibilities, those minutes that are left over are waiting for us to use for reflection, if we want them for that purpose.

You pay me to reflect – about God, about the world, about the Christian faith, about this church, about the Bible. Reflection is part of my working day, and that's one of the reasons I enjoy being a minister. I suspect that's true for many clergy. We pray as a matter of course, and much of our prayer is reflection – the turning over of thoughts and feelings in both senses of that phrase – turning them over in our minds and hearts, and turning them over to God.

And when I reflect on the question of why I'm a Christian, I find the answer in this morning's reading from Colossians, which I've taken for the text for the sermon: “[A]nd in him, all things hold together.”

In Jesus Christ, all things hold together. If you asked me why I'm a Christian, that's the answer I'd give. The world makes more sense to me because of what I believe about Jesus the Christ – which is to say, my trust in his way of life and death and life-beyond-death – than it otherwise does for me. I haven't found a way of being in the world that is superior for me than being in the world with Christ. It's as simple as that. That's why I'm a Christian.

Years ago, when I lived in Connecticut, I attended a Yom Kippur service, and as folks were taking their seats in the rather crowded chapel where the service was being held, I saw an empty seat at the same time a young woman and an elderly woman saw it

and saw that the other saw it. They both hurried toward the seat in their own way of hurrying, and since the young woman was quicker, she sat down in the seat before the older woman could get to it and then studiously looked away from the older woman. My initial reaction was, "Well, that's a fine Christian thing to do," and then I realized: Gene, a lot of these folks aren't Christian. That standard doesn't apply here.

Of course, standards of common decency apply everywhere, and I know that there are many Jewish people and Hindu people and Buddhist people and other folks who teach respect for elders, so Christianity doesn't have a lock on that market, but the point is that my frame of reference was so thoroughly Christian in those days that I applied that lens, that way of looking at the world, to every situation reflexively. And I still do.

The difference between then and now, however, I hope, is that I look through that lens in a less rigid and less moralistic way than when I was younger and more conservative.

One of the shocking things I discovered when I taught high school is how conservative at least some adolescents are when it comes to right and wrong. A group of ninth-graders and I were reading sections from the autobiography of the great Catholic social activist Dorothy Day, and when we read about Day's arrest in front of the White House with other suffragettes who were protesting in favor of women's right to vote, the students felt that Day had overstepped her bounds by being arrested, no matter how just her cause was, and they refused to take her views seriously after that point. I was stunned at how closely the morality of those ninth-graders was tied to law and order and what is socially acceptable and what is not.

And even though we later read about the life of Jesus in that course, I don't think I was very successful at drawing a connection between Day's arrest because of her work on behalf of the oppressed and Jesus' arrest because of his work on behalf of the oppressed in his time and place. I don't think I was very successful showing those ninth-graders how Day's Christian belief held her world together, whether she was being arrested on behalf of women, on behalf of farm workers, or on behalf of peace. Dorothy Day lived an activist life until she died at the age of 83, and the still point in her turning world, to use Eliot's phrase, was Jesus Christ.

More recently, a number of us gathered in Euclid Creek Reservation for prayer in the park, a time to study and reflect on our relationship with God and one another as members of God's creation. One of the people most influential in getting church people to take environmental stewardship seriously is Holmes Rolston III, a professor of philosophy at Colorado State University. Rolston began his career not as a scientist or as a philosopher of science, but as a Presbyterian pastor in the Appalachian mountains of western Virginia. It was there, during his prayerful walks through the native woods of his native land, where he saw the wholesale destruction of forests, mountains, and waterways, that he came to the firm belief that the way Christians relate to the God's creation is profoundly misguided and unfaithful. It was Rolston's faith, faith as a believer in Jesus Christ, that led him to work for the care of creation and made him the father of environmental ethics.

We are Christians, and this is a Christian church. I make no apologies for either of those facts because they need none. Christianity is nothing to be ashamed of. The way Christianity has been lived out by Christians, of course, is a different matter and there are problems. Gandhi famously said that having been born a Hindu and having spent much of his life examining the teachings of the world's religions, he would have been a Christian if it hadn't been for the Christians.

We all know that there are plenty of us in this family we call Christian who embarrass many of the rest of us, and we also know that we ourselves have plenty to be

ashamed of, not just in our private lives, but in the corporate life we live together as rich, powerful global northerners who support a system that keeps the wealth and health ours and the poverty and disease someone else's. We know that living that way is unjust and that we are part of that injustice, and we deceive no one but ourselves if we think that we are living faithfully by extending charity to those our chosen system keeps in poverty. The prophets of ancient Israel denounced that kind of self-deception over and over, and St. Augustine said many centuries later that charity is no substitute for justice withheld.

I want to close by returning to a word that I know makes some of you uncomfortable. It's evangelical, and it's a word that I apply to myself. Evangelical, in its root meaning, is about proclamation – the Greek word *euangelion* means “good news” -- and the good news that the first Christians proclaimed was that the salvation that God had promised had indeed arrived. Not as many people were expecting, with swords and shields and marching boots, and not by a hyper-pious withdrawal from the world to keep oneself untainted and pure.

The good news our Christian ancestors saw and have handed on to us was that salvation is to be found in the way of life revealed by the first-century teacher and healer from Nazareth named Jesus. A way of life deeply committed to justice in this world for all people, especially those the world shoves to the side, and a way of life absolutely committed to restoring wholeness to all of God's creation, a wholeness that even death itself cannot shatter.

The peace, the shalom, the wholeness that Jesus brought and brings to those who open themselves up to it, is not ended by death; that's the message of that resurrection greeting of Jesus to his disciples that appears four times in the gospels, “Peace be with you.” When the world thought it had done its best to do its worst, God proved the world wrong and the peace of God – the peace found in the life-giving life of Jesus the Christ – that peace survived. If that isn't good news – and if proclaiming that good news doesn't make all of us Christians evangelicals – then nothing is and nothing does.

Jesus the Christ showed us what it means to gain eternal life. You gain your life by losing it. You receive your life by giving it away. You live most fully and freely when you can say with Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” If you want the secret to life and death and life-beyond-death, that's it.

“[A]nd in him, all things hold together.”