

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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November 26, 2017 – Reign of Christ Sunday

A Different World is Possible Emerging!

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? – Ezekiel 34:17-24

This morning is a Sunday that has traditionally been called “Christ the King” Sunday, or the Reign of Christ Sunday. This is a Sunday to celebrate what is not always obvious to our sight so we have to affirm it with faith: that the ultimate ruler of the universe is the one who loved us so much that he died for us. Presidents and Prime Ministers and dictators may be important. They can do enormous good or enormous harm. They may be powerful, but they do not rule the universe. CEOs and generals and power brokers and billionaires may have a tremendous amount of power, but the power of love is greater still. Christ reigns in love, and because he reigns, other authorities must one day answer to him for their deeds.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus’ constant theme was the Kingdom of God, what Walter Wink calls “God’s non-domination order,” in which domination of any form would be replaced with mutuality and respectful cooperation. Jesus didn’t talk much about himself. He talked mainly about the Kingdom of God, but when he did talk about himself, he didn’t call himself a king or Messiah or ruler or divine being. To refer to himself, he used the phrase “The Son of Man,” which simply means “a human being.” But after his death and resurrection, his followers started to talk more about Jesus himself, and as they thought about the kingdom of God, they began to understand that Jesus himself had a central role in that kingdom, that only one who was crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross was worthy to rule such a kingdom.

The passages we read on this Sunday suggest that the way to respect Christ’s reign is to imitate his servant leadership, and use whatever power we have in service of the less powerful. Ezekiel’s vision of a God who will step in and shepherd the people arises out of a sense that the human leadership has not been good shepherds. The kings of Israel have not protected the weak against the strong, have not prevented some from taking more than their fair share, have not prevented them from trampling pasture and muddying the water. This passage is one of many in the Bible where environmental damage and social injustice are seen as linked and related. And God, to borrow a phrase from the 1978 film *Network*, “is mad as hell and not going to take it anymore!”

That passage is expressing the hope, not only that a different world is not only possible, but that it is inevitable, because God's love has a power that transcends the powers of earthly tyrants.

At their heart, this passage is about solidarity with those who might easily be ignored or overlooked. They are about protest, about the way in which people with little power and wealth are often exploited, and their needs and aspirations are ignored and overlooked. It is about God's protest against the way our economic systems inflict suffering and hardship.

Let me highlight three examples of that:

This week, President Robert Mugabe was finally expelled from power in Zimbabwe. Over the past forty years, Mugabe has systematically enriched himself at the expense of Zimbabwe's economy, and kept himself in power by torturing and intimidating any opposition. He is a classic example of a bad shepherd.

Closer at home, in recent weeks, there has been revelation after revelation about powerful men who have sexually harassed or sexually assaulted teenagers and young adults, both women and men. Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and Charlie Rose, to name just a few, and before that Donald Trump, and before that the Canadian broadcaster and musician Jian Ghomeshi. And on social media, the "Me Too!" campaign featured person after person, women mostly, but men too, who have experienced sexual harassment and assault. This kind of behaviour is so common that for many it was just the way things were, the price that had to be paid to move up the ranks in certain industries.

And it is really empowering and really encouraging to see the number of women and men who have stepped forward, broken the silence and made their experiences public. It cannot have been easy, because these men are powerful, and they have weapons. They can destroy reputations and careers, and it is only when several people come together at once that the tables get turned. But to break the silence is to give voice to God's own protest at the way some people exploit their power, at the way in which the strong sheep butt the skinny ones with shoulder and flank, to use Ezekiel's language.

A final example: did you hear that this past week, a painting by Leonardo da Vinci went up for auction, and that several people with very, very deep pockets were bidding against each other? The painting was initially expected to go for \$100 million US dollars, but the bidding quickly blew past that, to \$140 million, then \$240 million, then \$340 million, \$370, and finally four hundred million dollars. When you add in the commission charged by the auction house, the purchase price was over 450 million dollars! For a painting!

Now I appreciate that Leonardo was a great painter, and there are only eighteen of his paintings in existence, and they don't come up for sale very often, so I am not surprised that

there are people that wanted that painting, whether it was motivated by a pure love of art, or more likely, by the desire to own the ultimate status symbol. But what astonishes me is not just that someone has nearly a half billion dollars to spend on a painting, but that there were at least two of them, possibly more. In a world where billions of people don't have clean water, safe shelter, food and education, there are a few people who have so much money that they are prepared to bid hundreds of millions of dollars on a painting. That kind of obscene inequality is what makes God mad as hell!

This is a Sunday to focus on the line in the United Church Creed, that says that the crucified and risen Jesus is both "our judge and our hope." What does it mean to say that Jesus is our judge? Often the idea of judgement is linked to anger and condemnation, but when I think about judgement, I often think about my mother. My mother had three boys within four years, and we were what she called "a handful." Six years later, another boy came along, so she had two handfuls! For a few years, she managed to instill some order and encourage cooperation with the threat of a swat from a wooden spoon. But there came a day when my older brother was big enough and strong enough that Mom's strategy didn't work anymore. My brother grabbed the threatening wooden spoon and broke it over his knee. I still remember my mother's panicked look as she realized that her primary means of motivation had just been taken from her. But my mom was a resourceful woman, and she quickly discovered a new and better motivator: guilt. Guilt is an effective motivator, but even more effective than guilt was disappointment. When I think of Jesus as judge, I think of my mother's disappointment when I fell short of her expectations for me, when I fell short of my own potential.

Our creed says that the crucified and risen Jesus is both judge and hope. Judgement and hope are linked because if there is no judgement, then the way things are becomes simply the way things are. Without judgement, we have no ability to acknowledge that things can and should be different. Without my mother's disappointment, I would have had no sense that I was in fact falling short of the high standards she had for me, I would have had no sense that there were standards higher than the ones I had for myself. Without God's disappointment, we have no hope that relations between the powerful and those in their power can be anything other than abusive. Without God's disappointment, we have no hope that there are better ways to use wealth than for personal indulgence. Without God's judgement we have no way to distinguish between a ruler like Robert Mugabe and one like Nelson Mandela. Without God's judgement we have no hope that power can be used for kindness rather than for exploitation, or that wealth can be used to lift up the poor and to benefit the whole community. Without God's judgement, there is no hope that a better world is possible, a better world is necessary, a better world is on its way.

And that is why, in the passage from Ezekiel, God's disappointment in the behaviour of the powerful shepherds and the powerful sheep is linked to a promise, a promise that God is lifting up a good shepherd. The Christian church affirms Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who lay down his life for his sheep, and leaders of the church are called pastors, a word which means, simply shepherd, because we are also called to care for our sheep.

In 1995, Therese and I visited Guatemala for the first time. We spent an afternoon in the city of Santiago Atitlan, which has a memorial to a good shepherd. The good shepherd was an American priest named Stanley Rowther, who served that church during the mid-1980's. That was at the height of the brutal counter-insurgency campaign, in which the Guatemalan military was massacring thousands of Indians, with the tacit approval of American president Ronald Reagan. Father Rowther wrote a letter to his sister in Oklahoma, telling her about the brutal human rights violations that he was witnessing. She thought that the American people should know what their government was doing in Guatemala, so she arranged for his letter to be published in a local newspaper in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, the Guatemalan military employed a clipping service which monitored American newspapers, and this letter came to the attention of the military in Father Rowther's area. A visit was paid to Father Rowther, telling him he had twenty-four hours to leave the country. He refused, saying his place was with his people, and twenty-four hours later, a squad of soldiers came back and shot him dead. On his memorial, are these words from the gospel according to John: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Father Rowther is one of a long line of pastor/shepherds who have risked their lives in service to their people. He is an example for each of us that power is to be used to protect and nourish the community. He and many like him, including each of us when we use the power we have for the service of others, are the fulfillment of that ancient promise that God will provide a good shepherd. Sometimes we are the fulfillment of God's promises.

Let us pray: In a world beset by the abuse of power, O Holy One, pour out the healing of a love that shines the light of truth on the abuses that breed in darkness like cockroaches. In a world of violence, pour out the peace of a love that judges cruelty and oppression. In a world of apathy, pour out the fire of a love that arouses compassion and indignation. In our world, here where we live, make us instruments of your passionate peace, your outrageous love. For we pray these things in the name and Spirit of the one who emptied himself so that we might become full. Amen.