Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Reign of Christ

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THE COMMUNITY OF CREATION Colossians 1:11–20

John 18:33–37

This is the last Sunday of the church year, and it is always observed as the Sunday in which we celebrate the “Reign of Christ.” And so our thoughts turn to Jesus Christ as the Sovereign of our lives and of the life of the whole of creation.

Let us recall that in John’s Gospel, after Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews” he answers: “My kingdom is not from this world . . . My kingdom is not from here.” Jesus will not be the sovereign of an earthly kingdom. In fact, in the story of the temptations recorded in Matthew and Luke, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and offers them all to him if only he will fall down and worship him. Jesus refuses. Another refusal: in John’s Gospel after the feeding of the five thousand, fearing that the people want to make him king, he withdraws to a mountain by himself. (John 6:15)

How ironic it was, then, when Christianity aligned itself with the Roman Empire in the 4th century. Had Jesus been asked, I don’t think that he would have approved of the arrangement. The empire and Christianity became one and the same. To be born into the Roman Empire was to be a Christian from birth to death. What ever happened to the notion that the kingdom Jesus preached was a kingdom not of this world! Christian faith lost much in its new existence as part and parcel of imperial rule. It became an establishment rather than a movement. It surely lost its prophetic edge. No longer did it have the freedom to challenge the empire.

It turned out, however, that Christianity outlived the empire. It became a kind of empire all on its own. It was ruled from the Vatican and viewed itself as a kingdom equal in power to all the kingdoms surrounding it. It was, for the most part, this worldly.

Although there were Christians, such as those Francis of Assisi whose statue graces our churchyard, who resisted the tendency of Christianity to assume earthly political power, for the most part there has been a tendency to make Christianity into a worldly kingdom.

Even in our own American experience, ever since the Mayflower sailed into Plymouth Rock, Christianity has enjoyed a cultural establishment in the United States. Forces beyond its control are fast dismantling that establishment. Mainline Christian churches are undergoing a diminishment, which we well know here at NCC, and recent news reports have reported the beginnings of a similar diminishment among evangelical Christians. In the future, Christianity is going to look very different. It may be that Christians will form themselves into smaller communities of faith and commitment. And that will be a good thing.

In the 11th Century, Anselm of Canterbury coined the phrase “faith seeking understanding,” by which he meant that our Christian faith continually prompts a questioning spirit for deeper understanding. Such is our task these days. We can no longer rely on the conventional habits and understandings that have been central to American Christianity. We must discover new ways of being Christian.

Let us explore a case in point. This past week, in news reports, researchers have presented findings that declare more emphatically than before the serious threat climate change poses to the future life of the earth and to our own children and our children’s children. Climate change deniers are like ostriches burying their heads in the sand. The environmental changes we are experiencing, from rising seas to droughts to ravaging forest fires and hurricanes, are undeniable.

How will our Christian faith address these monumental changes? How will our faith seek understanding? I had this thought. Perhaps we should re-examine and re-interpret the “kingdom language” of the bible, which in many ways has not served Christian faith very well, as I tried to say in the earlier part of this sermon.

Randy Woodley, a Native American and a Christian, suggests that we take the idea of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament and begin to understand it as “the Community of Creation.” His suggestion is explored in a little book called *Shalom and the Community of Creation.*

Following the indigenous understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, Professor Woodley views the creation as an all-encompassing reality. For him as a Christian, Christ is the unifying principle. The community of creation is Christ’s domain. It is the realm over which Christ rules as both creator and sovereign. It is a realm that is not of this world, just as Jesus declared in the presence of Pilate. There are no comparable earthly kingdoms to which it can be compared.

Randy Woodley’s inspired notion comes from scripture itself. There are two passages of scripture that are central to this idea. The first is to be found in the first four verses of the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John. Speaking of Christ, the Gospel writer declares:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word

was with God, and the Word was God. He was

in the beginning with God. All things came into

being through him, and without him not one

thing came into being. What has come into being

in him was life, and the life was the light of

all people. The light shines in the darkness and

the darkness did not overcome it.

And the second passage is the passage of scripture we heard this morning from the Paul’s Letter to the Colossians. In this passage, Jesus is described as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

for in him all things in heaven and on earth were

created, things visible and invisible, whether

thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all

things have been created through him and for

him. He himself is before all things, and in

him all things hold together. —Colossians 1:16–18

This Christ is the head of the church and in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is the Creator and the Sovereign of the community of creation, which brings together and holds together everything to be found in earth and in heaven including humankind, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and the animals of the field, all plants and living things. In so many ways, the language of creation is richer than the language of kingdom. It sparks the human imagination to understand that as those who belong to Christ and the community of creation we are part of the web of life, and what we do to each part of the web we do to the whole. As Randy Woodley says, as those who belong to the community of creation, we are to seek the *shalom,* the wellbeing of the earth and its people. Adopting this language of creation, we may access a new theology that will give us the capacity as Christians to address the ever-growing reality of climate change and all that threatens the life of the earth and its people.

Kingdom language so often has been limited to the human dimension. Creation language broadens our understanding of the Christian faith as a faith that relates to the whole of the created order and the whole of life. Christ is the community of creation’s head, its creator and sovereign. This is the Christ we honor this day on this last Sunday of the church year. My brothers and sisters, this day and every day, may we give our primary allegiance to the Christ in whom we have life and in whom all things in heaven and on earth are held together. May it be so. Amen.