

Luke 1:68-79
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“Reign of Inclusive Christ”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

The Christian Church, for more than 90 years has celebrated the last Sunday of the church year, as “Reign of Christ” Sunday. Next Sunday we begin the whole story all over in Advent as we eagerly, hopefully await the birth of Christ. So before the New Year begins we remind ourselves the kingdom of Christ takes primary rule in our hearts. As we consider the Reign of Christ I was moved this week by an old quote from a Professor of New Testament, Rev. Dr. Lewis Donelson, who says, “It is the task of all Christians to find the gospel in whatever worldview they hold. This is no easy task.”

So this morning I want to share some stories, word pictures if you will, of where I have seen the sacred reign of Christ uncovered in the life of faith.

As a Pastor I have heard numerous stories of families who were planning a baptism in their church. The plans were completed, they had dates in mind for the event and the family went to their pastor. The pastor reviewed the plans and then asked who was going to be the godparents? When the family answered, it turned out they had chosen someone who was not a member of that church. In each situation, the pastor told the family they had to change their godparents or he would not preside at the baptism. The families could have changed godparents to friends who were part the church. Instead each of these families decided this “rule” did not fit into their understanding of the inclusive reign of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, and they left the churches they loved to find a more inclusive congregation.

Holy Communion is another place I see Christ’s Inclusive Reign. You may be aware Emanuel conducted our first same gender marriage ceremony this past summer. I officiated a wedding for two very dear friends with many of their family and friends in attendance. This wedding became a great deal of work when the grooms wanted to include a lot of things in the ceremony that we don’t normally do. In fact, for the first time in my career the couple requested communion be served as a part of the ceremony. This meant lots of extra work to prepare communion, find servers, train everyone on their job and complete all the important work which is undertaken on a regular basis by dedicated members of our worship committee.

The day came, the work was done, and it was deeply inspiring to see so many people pour forward, eagerly anticipating receiving the grace and forgiveness of God. Many had not received communion since their youth. As young adults, they felt rejected by their childhood church and now they came forward smiling ear to ear, approaching with deep reverence to receive the bread and wine. At the reception, afterward I heard from many how important it was to be invited to communion, how many decades it had been since they received communion, and how deeply it touched them.

Worship is another place we experience the deep unity of God’s Reign. How we all hang on the ringing of the handbells, how we are deeply moved by the final note of the Prelude. How

we all fall silent as we pray. And not just in our worship. It was a powerful experience last weekend, when after about an hour of answering our questions during a visit to the Islamic Society of Milwaukee, Iman Hamdan stood up and said he needed to go to prayers, and then... invited all 23 of us to stay in their prayer room and observe their prayer practice. We watched as the men chanted and prayed, moving from a standing position, to kneeling to placing their forehead on the floor in tempo with the prayers.

Worship is a place we experience God's reign. A trusted colleague tells this story. "One day in church, a beloved, faithful, older lady, fell to the sanctuary floor and hit her head. All those around her sprang into action. People attended her, comforted her as much as they could. Paramedics were called. When they arrived the emergency crew determined to take her in the ambulance to get her checked out, and she stopped them for a moment. Before she let them wheel her out of church, she called over one of the ushers who had been helping. She told him, "My offering is in my purse... Please see that it gets into the plate."

In this life the Reign of God is only seen in glances and glimmers. This is the Reign where one is prepared to die on the cross for all he knows to be true, and good, and perfect. The Reign which is powerful, mysterious, and gracious enough to hold together the foundations of creation with the everyday command to us to live as a community of love -- in the power of Jesus Christ.

I often wish that Jesus, during one of those arguments among the disciples, would have said, "You will always have your differences and disagreements among you, but through it all you have to live out God's reign, the inclusive, inspiring, love intoxicated reign God."

I think this is what the good professor Lee Donelson is saying in our opening quote, speaking into the culture of yesterday, today and tomorrow, "It is the task of all Christians to find the gospel in whatever worldview they hold. This IS not easy task." This means not inserting the gospel into our world view, but to find it already there, underneath and within everything. And if we don't find it, we keep looking, asking, doubting, searching.

Since we see God's Reign in glimmers and glances, it is our task when we see it to name it, lift it up and call it what it is, God's kingdom of Love and light. To me "Reign of Christ" Sunday is a way in any cultural setting to ask, "How do we stay focused on Christ and his realm."

At summer camp during High School I learned a song which has become a favorite of mine to sing when the windows are closed and no one is in the house... you might know it too... "The Lord of the Dance." The verses work their way through high and low points in Jesus life, showing how he always set the example of trusting in God and living out God's reign. In each new day and stage, Jesus' primary devotion remained teaching and revealing the reign of God on earth. The final verse referring to Good Friday says, "I danced on a Friday when the world turned black. It's hard to dance with the devil on your back. They buried my body; they thought I was gone. But I am the dance, and the dance goes on."

Amen