

A Lectio Experience of Love

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 26, 2017 ~ ~ Reign of Christ Sunday
Text: Matthew 25:31-26

Today we have a rather unusual occurrence in the church's life brought about by a rare shift in the church's liturgical or worship calendar. We are experiencing today a Sunday of Thanksgiving Weekend which is *not* the First Sunday of Advent. That's because Thanksgiving happened about as early as it can this year since the fourth Tuesday – the traditional date for Thanksgiving – happened on November 23. This truly does not happen all that often which is why it is so unusual that this last Sunday before the start of Advent – called Reign of Christ Sunday on the liturgical calendar – does not coincide with Thanksgiving Sunday. Instead, this is literally a sort of free standing Sunday for a change. For once we don't have to rush past this Reign of Christ Sunday in our hurry to celebrate Thanksgiving or the beginning of Advent. We get to just ponder this Sunday all on its own and that, I think, is a good thing.

First, just a brief explanation of what Reign of Christ Sunday is all about. It originated in the Roman Catholic Church in 1925, as Christ the King Sunday. It was instituted by Pope Pious XI, to address what the Pope saw as a rising tide of secularism in church and society. Its original intent was to remind the people of what it

is Jesus asks of the people who say they want to follow him. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the emphasis is on what is called blood atonement theology – the notion that Jesus died on the cross as punishment for our sins – and that his sacrifice on the cross requires certain actions in kind from the people who claim the name Christian. Namely, people are to live strictly according to the teachings of the church drawn from Holy Scripture in order to assure themselves of a place in heaven when they die.

This notion of a special Sunday to pause to remind ourselves of who Christ is to us has been embraced by all the churches who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, ourselves in the United Church of Christ included. However, in the United Church of Christ we have renamed this Sunday as “Reign of Christ” Sunday quite deliberately. For us this holiday is not about following a set of dogmatic rules just so that we can earn a place in heaven someday. For us this holiday is about who Christ was and is in our lives. It is about how Christ is counting on us to live our lives as followers of the way of life he set before us, a life built on love as the foundation of everything. Reign of Christ Sunday for us is a time to pause to remember what it is Jesus taught us about who we need to be and what it is Jesus is counting on us to do as people of the church, as people who are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world we encounter every day.

For us, then, Reign of Christ Sunday comes down to love – the Jesus kind of love – which is totally different from the romantic love we think of on Valentine’s Day or the family kind of love we celebrate on Mother’s Day or Father’s Day. For us, this Sunday is to consider how it is Jesus’ understood love and the vital role it plays in life each day, if only we pause to consider it, make room for it, look for it, practice it. So, today, because this is a unique Sunday on the calendar, I thought it might be fun – and the Deacons agreed with me – if we did something a little different to explore a very special scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew as we seek to understand together what love means to Jesus. We are going to participate together in a communal experience of Bible study known as Lectio Divina.

Here’s how it works:

- I’m going to ask you to find one or two other people to talk with as this Bible study conversation unfolds. It’s okay to move to do this!! Okay, find your group!!
- Now we are going to proceed into Bible study mold. If you normally like to have your Bible open to follow along, I’m going to ask you to close it and just listen as I read the text out loud. The idea of Lectio is to let the Scripture reveal itself to you in its own way as you hear it.

- So, get comfortable and take a deep breath. Clear your mind of all those thoughts racing through it as much as you can, and listen as I read the text again.

[Read Matthew 25:34-40.]

- Okay, what word or phrase do you remember the clearest from what you just heard? Turn to your group and each person take just a moment to tell them your word or phrase.

[Read Matthew 25:34-40 again.]

- Okay, here we go again. I'm going to read the text again and this time I want you to see what image forms in your mind as you hear this text read. If you can, imagine yourself sitting at the feet of Jesus along with the disciples as he tells this story.
- Tell your group as briefly as you can what image came to you as you heard this text once more.

[Read Matthew 25:34-40 one last time.]

- Now this time, I would like you to share with your group a personal experience you have had with one of these situations Jesus describes as an opportunity to encounter him through love. Or perhaps what is on your heart this morning is a time when you didn't respond but instead walked away.

Okay, let's spend some time talking about this together.

What were some of the words and phrases that stood out for you during the first reading? [pause for responses]

And what were some of the images that came to you during the second reading? [pause for responses]

Now, for the tough part. What kinds of experiences have you personally had with one of these Jesus' moments – one of the times when you had an opportunity to live the love of Jesus instead of just talk about it? [pause for responses]

Okay, good. How has this way of experiencing the text helped you today? How has it made a difference in the way you understand this text and its relationship to your life? Or has it? [pause for responses]

Well, I thank you very much for your willingness to do a new thing here this morning. If you enjoyed it, we can do again, every now and then as a change of pace. Yes??

As a way of concluding our conversations this morning, given the topic of caring for those less fortunate than ourselves, I can think of no more appropriate time to bless our Reverse Advent Baskets than right now. These Reverse Advent Baskets are intended as a focal point for you to keep in your mind and heart this busy time of year all the blessings of your life by sharing those blessings with others not so fortunate. There is an explanation of how the Reverse Advent Basket can be used in each basket but the idea is essentially this. Each day of Advent – which begins next

Sunday – you are to place one item in the basket which is something you will eventually share with someone in need. You get to pick what that is. You can put in socks or breakfast foods to coordinate with our other Advent projects this year. You can do school supplies or personal care products like shampoo and soap and the like. Or, you can even put in money – but this should be a decent amount so that at the end you have at least \$24 – one for each day of Advent. Then you use that money to purchase items to give away. Also, important – your offer a prayer each time you add something to the basket each day. A prayer is suggested or you can come up with one on your own. The Reverse Advent Basket is a simple thing to do to celebrate Advent, but in a different kind of way. You have to make the effort to do it, especially in a way that keeps those you are trying to help in the forefront of your mind and heart during this very busy time of year. Easy? NO! Important to do? YES! Because love isn't love until you give it away. Love isn't love until it makes a difference. Like the love between the mother and the son in our storybook for today. Like the love Jesus talks about as the kind that can literally change the world, one life at a time.

“Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Amen.

BLESSING OF THE REVERSE ADVENT BASKETS!!!!