

Hope for Thanksgiving

By: Rachel Helton

November 21, 2021. As Thanksgiving is upon us, guest preacher Rachel Helton asks us to be thankful for all the blessings in our lives, and open to receiving the things that we need, and generous with our possessions, our bread, our time, our commitment to justice, our willingness to extend mercy and compassion, and our desire to be Christ in the world to one another, in order to experience the fullness of the reign of God.

Reading: [John 18:33-37](#)

*** Transcript ***

Won't you pray with me? Holy God, may the words that I speak and the ponderings of our hearts be full of grace and be pleasing to you. Amen.

Some of you may know that I'm currently interning as a chaplain at Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital. And this week is Heritage Week for all of the SSM hospitals and ministries, where we are encouraged to remember and reflect upon the legacy and mission of the Sisters of St. Mary. A group of five German nuns, led by Sister Odilia, arrived in St. Louis in 1872 with the mission of revealing the healing presence of God through service to the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of others.

So Thursday morning as I entered the hospital I was greeted with a loaf of bread. And I thought that's interesting, but I'll take it. And it was accompanied with this card, which I will read to you:

The Legend of the Loaf of Bread: One day a man came to the convent door asking for food. The sister in charge of the kitchen went to Mother Odilia for help. So picture this, back in the 1870s, this man is coming, asking for help. There was but one loaf of bread in the house. Was she to refuse the appeal of the man, or deprive the sisters? Without hesitation, Mother Odilia said, "Give the man what he asks, sister. The Lord will provide for us." Only half-convinced, the sister obeyed and gave away the loaf of bread.

Some hours later, a child was sent by her mother to deliver a pan of freshly baked rolls to the sisters. When the child arrived at the convent she was greeted with, "The Lord has come. You are the Lord today, little one!" Greatly surprised, the child was told the meaning of the spontaneous exclamation. And so is the legend of the loaf of bread.

This Sunday we come to the close of our church year and we find ourselves at a crux between the season after Pentecost and the season of Advent. In that space between the seasons of celebrating the work of the Spirit in the world and the season of expectation for Emanuel, God with us, and we find ourselves at Christ the King Sunday, pondering what it means to call Jesus "king" and what it means to participate in the kingdom or the reign of God.

Our gospel reading for today takes us not to Jesus transfigured and shining in glory or Jesus ascending into the clouds, but to Jesus on trial before Pilate. On Christ the King Sunday, we take a good hard look at what it means to have a king who is on trial, a king who will be mocked and crucified. And those around him are mocked too, for putting their hope in something beyond the Roman Empire.

When Pilate asks Jesus the first time, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is

not from this world.” It’s almost as if Jesus is saying, “We’re not even talking about the same thing here.” Last week, we heard about the disciples and Jesus who were both looking at the temple, but seeing different things. And the destruction of the temple was the revealing, or the uncovering, of the truth about God’s presence and God’s love. So too, the kingdom of God is completely unrecognizable to Pilate’s understanding of kingship as power and privilege. It’s the dismantling of earthly kingdoms and hierarchies that uncovers the full experience of the kingdom of God. Jesus, who cannot be defined and confined by time and space, represents a kingdom that cannot be defined by these measures either.

When Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world,” he is not saying that he doesn’t belong here or that his kingdom is somewhere off in the clouds or out in the future. Rather, he is completely redefining the whole idea of kingship. This kingdom, which is both now and not yet, is witnessed in the sharing of a loaf of bread now, and in the not yet reality that there are still those who are hungry.

Jesus is saying that unlike earthly kingdoms which find their security in the power they are able to hold over others, the kingdom of God is grounded in the promise of hope and peace and justice and belonging, promises that are rooted in relationship with a God who was, and is, and is to come, the alpha and omega, the all-encompassing, the ever-present. And we are invited into that relationship, we are invited to participate in the work of the kingdom right now, not out of obligation or subjugation, not because we are forced to by a dictator king, but because it is through reliance on one another, and ultimately reliance on God, that we experience God’s reign and have hope for the full restoration of creation.

When Jesus is asked a second time by Pilate, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” Earlier in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, Jesus says, “I am the way, the life, and the *truth*.” And in John 8, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Being in relationship with Christ brings us into relationship with the truth; we belong to the truth — the truth that we are beloved and set free to do justice, to love kindness, to share our bread, knowing that God has already provided enough for all, if only we are willing to share it.

Jesus in his full humanity invites us to embrace our full humanity as we bear witness to the truth of the kingdom where all are fed, where all get what they need rather than what they deserve, where all are welcome, where peace and justice are established, and where love is always the final word.

In closing, I want to share with you the words of a hymn from the new “All Creation Sings” hymnal. It’s hymn 1062 and the tune is a French carol that you might recognize from “Now the Green Blade Riseth.” I won’t sing but I’ll hum it at least so you can think of how this would sound. People are nodding. They’re recognizing that tune. So the words really speak to me about the vision of God’s kingdom.

1. Build a longer table, not a higher wall,
feeding those who hunger, making room for all.
Feasting together, stranger turns to friend,
Christ breaks walls to pieces; false divisions end.

2. Build a safer refuge, not a larger jail;
where the weak find shelter, mercy will not fail.
For any place where justice is denied,
Christ will breach the jail wall, freeing all inside.

3. Build a broader doorway, not a longer fence.
Love protects all people, sparing no expense.
When we embrace compassion more than fear,
Christ tears down our fences: all are welcome here.

4. When we lived as exiles, refugees abroad,
Christ became our doorway to the reign of God.
So must our tables welcome those who roam.
None can be excluded; all must find a home.

As Thanksgiving is upon us, I hope that we can be thankful for all the blessings in our lives, and open to receiving the things that we need, and generous with our possessions, our bread, our time, our commitment to justice, our willingness to extend mercy and compassion, and our desire to be Christ in the world to one another, in order to experience the fullness of the reign of God.

Thanks be to God.

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