“In the End, Love”

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The Celebration of the Reign of Christ

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Ezekiel 34:15-16, 20-22

Revelation 22:1-5

Matthew 25:31-46

Last week, my jaw dropped when I read a headline in the New York Times referring to “Matthew 25 Democrats.”

“What?” I said to myself. “Matthew 25 in the NYTimes?”

We all know that the twenty-fifth chapter of the gospel of Matthew isn’t headline material for the Times; politicians referencing Matthew 25 when speaking of their faith, on the other hand, is newsworthy. And for good reason.

Matthew 25, as you heard Nicole read for us a few minutes ago, is the gospel reading for this day, the last Sunday of the church year. Some of us grew up calling this day Christ the King Sunday; our wing of the church names it the Celebration of the Reign of Christ.

Whatever you call it, this New Year’s Eve of the church calendar is the day the entire church year has been moving toward because it is the second-greatest assertion of God’s power and promise, surpassed only by Easter. And like Easter, this is another Sunday when the church voices its twin expressions of trust and hope.

Today is when we celebrate our conviction that Jesus the Christ, the embodiment of God’s self-sacrificial, crucified, and risen love, is the ultimate power of the universe, and that assertion in that love forms the church’s last word on everything else it believes.

I realize that what I’m saying may sound a little extreme for a day many of us have paid little attention to. But when Pope Pius XI instituted this solemnity in 1925, the world was in turmoil.

Europe was reeling from the First World War—"the war to end all wars"—which had claimed more than fifteen million lives and resolved nothing. Amid the destruction, poverty, hunger, disease, and political collapse, secularism, nationalism, and extremism surged. Mussolini had seized power by force, and Hitler was finding his malignant voice. Christians, in growing numbers, were being seduced by leaders who promised to make their nations great again but in fact trafficked in lies, violence, and fear.

The pope could see what was happening and realized that Christians needed a clear and unambiguous reminder of who their true leader was and, more importantly, what power looks like in that leader's hands and in that leader's realm.

That realm appears in the scene of the final judgment, carved in stone above the main doors of many European cathedrals. Most of us would rather ignore that forbidding image, but it reminded everyone entering what matters most to Christians: caring for those who cannot care for themselves. "When you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

That's why Forest Hill Church is a Matthew 25 Congregation. We do not shy away from embracing that sobering image and making a distinction—judging, to use the traditional language—between the world God wills and the world we have created, and since the 1960s this congregation has understood its mission to be narrowing that gap.

And because we are a church and not the Democratic party at prayer or the Anti-Defamation League with hymns, we believe the source of our mandate doesn't come from politics. It doesn't come from sociology or history. It doesn't even come from prudential wisdom, such as Paul Wellstone's maxim "We all do better when we all do better."

Common sense tells us that's true, but common sense is not the source of our mission as followers of Jesus the Christ. Instead, we look to him, the author and perfecter of our faith, as Hebrews describes him, the firstborn of all creation, as Paul described him to the Colossians. That's Jesus the cosmic Christ we're talking about, not simply Jesus the first-century Palestinian rabbi from Nazareth.

And, specifically, we look to Jesus' words in today's gospel reading—"When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink"—not only because the words are his, but because those words reflect the mission God gave to all the people of God, our entire religious tradition, and not just to us Matthew 25 congregations.

The people of God are called to be blessings themselves and so bless the world around them. That is a divine mandate, and when we lose track of that mandate's divine

source, and try to replace it with our own notions of what we are called to do in this world, we often go astray from God's realm and enter the realm of power politics.

That's the situation the prophet Ezekiel was in when he spoke to Israel's leaders who had failed to keep God's people focused on their divine mandate and their true leader. God says through the prophet, "I **myself** will search for **my** sheep… I will seek the lost… bind up the injured… strengthen the weak… and feed them with **justice**."

What an extraordinary promise!

When earthly rulers fail—as they all, sooner or later, do—God remains faithful. God remains waiting for us to return—to God, to our calling, and to our true selves, which are the images and likenesses of God.

There is tremendous power in becoming transparent to our divine source and nature. When Genesis says we are created in the image and likeness of God, it means we have divinity in us; we don't merely reflect divinity, we contain it. We are made of the same stuff as God.

People "Oooo" and "Ahhh" when inspirational speakers say we are made of star dust—which is true—so I am baffled that folks don't react the same way when told that we are made of God dust as well. Do believers have any idea what power there is in their own divinity?

Apparently we do not, because we, like our neighbors who do not share our beliefs, so often turn to the means and mechanisms of this world to get our bearings and respond to problems in ways we think will help. We reach for the instruments of familiar power—political, economic, military power—to get things done the way we think they ought to be done.

That's why many of us in this church were pleased with the outcome of the most recent election. Many of us think the blue way of doing things is better than the red way, and some of us think that the purple way is best of all. And having made our political pronouncements, we try to persuade ourselves, like Professor Pangloss, that "all is for the best in this the best of all possible worlds."

But it is not, and as believers we know it is not.

Deep inside of us is a love that will not let us go. It is the love that is **in** history but is not **of** history. It is the love that continually pulls us beyond history. It is the love that says **to** history, "You are not the last word. I am." If that sounds familiar to you, it came to Moses from a burning bush. It is transcendent love.

That is the love that spoke to Ezekiel, “I myself will search for my sheep… I will seek the lost… bind up the injured… strengthen the weak… and feed them with justice.”

Divine love is not defeated by the failures of earthly leaders. It finds its way into the cracks and crevices of this world, often through those whose hearts have been broken open by pain, suffering, and injustice. And it persists when everything else we’ve counted on—blue, red, or purple, Baptist, Methodist, Orthodox, or Presbyterian—lets us down.

And that is why that love—divine love—is the most powerful and must durable thing we’ve ever conceived of. It will outlast everything.

Because we have sentimentalized love, we think of it as squishy and weak. Divine love is neither. It is clear, bracing, challenging, and demanding. As Dorothy Day, quoting Dostoevsky, often said, “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”

That is the kind of love depicted in Matthew and Revelation. Many people, Christians included, are unnerved by Revelation’s harsh and dreadful imagery of God freeing us from evil, but that imagery is penultimate, not ultimate. What Revelation shows as ultimate—what is really real, what remains at the end—is divine love. Hear it again:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb [2] through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

That’s what divine love looks like; it’s what divine power looks like. That’s what the reign of God looks like. That’s what the final verdict of the final judgment looks like: the healing of the nations.

And how are we called to participate in that healing? By using that divine power that is ours by virtue of our divine birthright: “When I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me.” That’s how we become co-creators with our creator in creating a new heaven and a new earth.

On this last Sunday of our church year, we are reminded that to follow Jesus is to follow the slain Lamb of God, enthroned at the center of it all with ultimate power, ultimate authority, and ultimate claim on our lives.

For much of Christian history, we have implicitly claimed Christianity, rather than Jesus, as sovereign and savior. Sometimes we’ve been explicit about it. Saint Cyprian of

Carthage said in the 3rd century, “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Millions of Christians still hold that view today: our way or the highway.

That’s not the view I find in the whole witness of Scripture, and I don’t find that view expressed in any of our readings for this last Sunday of our church year.

What I find instead is the view in the title of Pastor Rob Bell’s best-known book, *Love Wins*. That’s Pastor Bell’s Gen X way of expressing the doctrine of divine sovereignty, a bedrock belief of our Reformed tradition. Ezekiel, Matthew, and Revelation all unwaveringly assert the same thing: in the end, love wins because God is love. Not weak, squishy love, but a love powerful enough and trustworthy enough that God’s people can trust in that love, embrace that love, live that love, and proclaim their hope in that love on the last Sunday of their liturgical year. If the Matthew 25 Democrats can provide any hope at all, let us hope that they can create enough space through their faith in Matthew 25 Christianity that we can delivered from corrupt and failed leaders, that strangers will be welcomed rather than abused, and that this nation and all the nations of earth will be nourished not with dollars but with justice. Bryan Stevenson spoke accurately and prophetically when he said that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.

We believe that God’s word, and no one else’s, will be the last word. And that word is love, which is why this last Sunday of the church year is not a celebration of squishy sentimentality. It is, on the contrary, a celebration of God’s embodied love and thus a profound expression of Christian hope.

There are two Sundays set aside in the church year as the church’s great expressions of hope. The first is Easter—the celebration of God’s victory over pain, sin, and death in Jesus’ resurrection—and the second is today, the celebration of the reign of Christ. It is not the celebration of the reign of Christianity; it is the celebration of the Christ—God’s anointed, crucified, and risen savior of the entire creation. That is why our church year does not end in timidity or anxiety; it ends in triumphant hope. We believe, and therefore we hope, that God’s word of love, here long before we got here and here long after we’re gone, will be the last word. In the end, it is God. In the end, it is love.

What a great way to end one year, friends, and what a great way to begin another. Happy new year, everyone.