

“Listening to Truth”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 25, 2018

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds;

*every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;*

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, '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. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of the Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take all that is within us. I pray that you would take the words we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart. Touch, bless, and transform all of these so that they become the living word of Jesus Christ. And I pray that that word would live within us. I pray that that word would live through all of us so that the good news of Christ would be offered to the world in all that we say and in all that we do. I pray this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Anybody have Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday [laughter]? So earlier I asked if you would pray for my wife. Only part of that is because I'm going to have surgery again. The other part is because I ruined her Thanksgiving. I do all the cooking at our house. My wife is a traditionalist. She loves the big turkey to come out all brown and smelling delicious. And so this Thanksgiving, I warned her on Monday. I said, "I'm finally going to prepare the turkey the way I want to, which is I'm going to take it all apart, I'm going to put it on a tray, and before I put the breasts of the turkey on the tray, I'm going to butterfly them open - sorry - lay prosciutto and sage and a little bit of salt inside of it. I'm going to roll it all back up and put some string on it, and we're going to have turkey loaf that's delicious. And she said, "Okay, fine. That's all right with me."

And so we did that. I brought the turkey and the stuffing to the table. Our son Sam and his fiancé brought mashed potatoes and some other things. Anna and her husband Anthony brought birthday cake because it was my birthday, her birthday, and Anthony's birthday, and then they brought some adult beverages. We all gathered at the table. We said our prayers. We had our meal, and it was awesome. I did not ruin Thanksgiving. Yes! But it was fun! Anybody else have fun with all the people that were at the table, having conversation, being together? It's a great time. And what I want to do is take that idea of sitting at the table and sort of imagine that instead of walking up and taking communion or being back

there and taking it, that we imagine the table having chairs around it. What I want to do is use that table image and think about what Jesus trying to get us to understand when he's talking about kingdom and truth?

Thanksgiving for our family is you have a big meal, and then you put on your jammies, and you take a nap. Is there anybody-- and you don't need to raise your hands, but is there anybody who on Thursday at 5:00 PM race to the store because Black Friday couldn't wait until Friday? Instead, it started on Thursday at 5:00 PM. And if you show up, you get a door prize, and you get 10% off. And then on Friday, you could get up early and go shopping and buy more stuff you don't need. And if you missed it, guess what? Tomorrow is Cyber Monday, and you can go online and again buy more stuff that you don't need. And you'll save 30% or 40%. Oh, that's the kingdom that we live in, that crazy, buy-more-stuff-that-we-don't-need kingdom. And what Jesus is saying when he says that his kingdom is not of this world is he's saying that that's not the way that God works. Instead of being crazy and busy and getting more stuff, come sit at the table, enjoy a meal, be welcomed, let my presence reside within you and within each other as you sit and talk and have a good time. In a sense, Jesus is holding up the craziness of this world and his ideal, which is found really at the table of communion, and he's holding those things and saying, "Which one will you choose?" I'm hoping that I'm going to advocate for the table because, to me, that is good news in the midst of all the craziness.

This Sunday is the last Sunday in the church year, and next Sunday is the first Sunday of a whole new year in the life of the church. We begin with Advent. And in a sense, this Sunday finishes something, and then next Sunday we begin something brand new. We start lighting candles on the Advent wreath. The greens are hung around the sanctuary, and we get ready for Christmas. And what I want to do, besides lifting up the table as an example of the way Christ wants us to be in the world, is I also want to have Christ the King Sunday be not just the ending of something but a turning towards something new. Because Advent gives us some clues as to what we're supposed to be about when we're sitting at the table together. When we come together for Advent, we light the candles of love, hope, peace, and joy. And in those candles-- and especially in the Christ candle--in those five candles we get the clear sort of demonstration of what Jesus wants us to be about when we come to the table and are with each other and when we leave the table and go out into the world. Christ wants us to take that love, peace, hope, and joy into the world. I found a poem that kind of captures that sense of what it is that God is wanting to do in our lives in order that the light of Christ and the light of love, peace, hope, and joy can become visible to ourselves and especially to others. It's called Clearing, and it's by Martha Postlewaite. "Do not try to save the whole world or do anything grandiose. Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life and wait there patiently until the song that is your life falls into your own cupped hands, and you recognize and greet it. Only then will you know how to give yourself to this world so worth of rescue." When we come to the table, we see each other, we see food, but I also want us to see the space that is between us. Because it's in the interactions that we have that the goodness really takes hold.

And so if we clear out the clutter of buying a bunch of stuff and we clear out the busyness of our lives and we sit and we wait, what is that goodness that God puts in our hands? We know love, hope, peace, and joy and that we can celebrate that together. We can be fed by that today and we get to take that out into the world. So when we were sitting at the table we are having conversations about what Christmas would be like and something happened this year that hasn't happened before. I got an email from my mother. She sent it to my brother and I and it said, "Dear David and Mike, Instead of sharing Christmas gifts with each other, your Dad and I have decided that we're going to go to Walmart and pay off someone's layaway gifts for their children. We're thinking that you might like to join us and then we won't share gifts. We'll just talk on the phone on Christmas day." And so I brought that to the table discussion and we're all talking about it and going, hey, this isn't a bad idea. So I'm analyzing what we said and translating that and cleaning it up just a little bit [laughter]. But the conversation was about instead of getting more stuff, why don't we help other people and so the energy shifted from everything pointing at each other to now thinking about how does it go out into the world and I was thinking that instead of going to Walmart and paying for someone's layaway thing, I'm going to make an extra gift to Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services which is an organization that Jani and I support. But I thought I'm going to take that extra money and give it to them so that a child could have a better Christmas in that way rather than just through gifts and so we were talking about that idea and everyone's like, yeah. That sounds good and all the energy is bubbling. Still goodness and joy at the table, but now we're starting to think about other people and as I was sitting there realizing that I had to preach on kingdom and truth which sounds so cold and distant, what dawned on me is that what I remembered was a story that I had read about a woman who talked about praying for her daughter and her daughter just had so many things going wrong in her life and the mom was really afraid for her, and what she did at one point, she kept praying and praying and nothing happened and she found herself one morning sitting at the table in the kitchen where they have all

their meals. The daughter hasn't been home for years. She was sitting in her usual spot. Across from her is the spot where her daughter sat and she said for some reason she just went around the table and she pulled out the chair and she went back to her usual spot. She laid her hands on the table palms up and she just imagined her daughter sitting there and her praying with her daughter. She said as she did the act of pulling out the chair and coming and sitting down and laying her hands on the table it was like some sense of peace just settled upon her and she was able to pray in such a way that she finally had some hope and then she said it dawned on me that I'm not here alone. Not only is my daughter here in spirit but she then moved out all the other chairs to make space around the table because she realized that God the Creator was there, Christ the Redeemer was there, the Spirit was there, other people that were praying for her daughter were there in spirit and I wish the story ended with what it meant for the daughter. But it concluded with what it meant for the mother. She said there was just an overwhelming sense of peace as she made space at the table, reached out her hands, and just prayed and trusted and hope was there in a way that it hadn't been before. So as you think about the kingdom of God, what I want you to imagine is a table with lots of chairs and lots of room. You are welcome to sit at that table. But I also want you to imagine that the chair next to you is pushed up tight to the table and that you get to pull it out and make space for only the Lord knows who. Maybe you know who you're going to pray for. But maybe you don't and that's okay. By doing that I believe that we can tap into the love, peace, hope, and joy that Christ is offering to the world. In that moment it touches us and then, more importantly, we can carry it from the table out into the world and share it with others. That's my prayer for all of us as we enter into the season of Advent. Amen.