

When I was in high school, I went to a youth group held at the First Free Methodist church across the street from Seattle Pacific. I was the church's sexton and my own church didn't have enough youth to form a group, so I found myself trying to fit in with people who had a very different perspective on scripture.

We were talking about this passage from John one evening—I hesitate to call it a Bible *study*—that's what Pastor Bill called it, although it was more of a Bible *statement*. Our study leader was only two years older than me, but he spoke with a remarkable confidence. "Jesus," Gene announced, "is asserting his independence. Jesus is totally separating himself from this world; the world that you and I live in and that Pilate and all those who accused Jesus lived in."

Maybe that's true, maybe not, I thought, but Gene was not inviting us into a dialogue. "Jesus is taking his fate into his own hands," Gene went on. "He's telling Pilate, 'You're not the boss of me,' and he wants us to do the same thing. To separate ourselves from this world and to maintain our independence."

I didn't agree with him, but before I could say anything, Pastor Bill stepped in to explain that Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. I felt a wave of relief. Now, *that* seems right, I thought. "Jesus is pointing out that when the final conflict comes in *his* kingdom," Pastor Bill said, "*that's* when his followers will fight." And he referred us to the book of Revelation if we wanted to see how that war was going to come about.

Now I *really* had questions. And I had a lot of them. After asking one or two of those, one of the other Young Adult ministers took me aside to tell me that the group really did not appreciate my attitude. Now, to be fair, the feeling was becoming rather mutual. A few weeks later, I stopped going to their meetings. I was told that they would pray for my "backsliding," but I think we both felt pretty good about my departure.

I took the rest of my questions with me and I actually still have a few. But my curiosity did lead me to conclude that the Revelation to John of Patmos may well be the most misunderstood book in Christian scripture.

You see, a consistent theme throughout the Revelation is the appeal to Christians *not* to wring their hands in despair but to *rejoice*. The plea *not* to live in the hopes of some kind of “get out of hell free” card, but to live in defiance of the self-importance, the consumption and the violence that surrounds us in this world because these powers have already been conquered. John’s Revelation acknowledged to the early church that there was and still is violence and hatred and jealousy in this world. But like so much of the rest of our scripture, John’s Revelation proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven is *also* present, though not yet fully.

Let me show you what I mean: We heard from Revelation this morning a reference to Christ “who *loves us*” (present tense) and who *freed us* from our sins...and *made us* to be a kingdom” serving God. “Freed us and made us” are both past tense. Christ’s love for us is always already present. What Jesus Christ did on our behalf, he did in the past and the effects remain perpetually. The God who loves us and freed us has already made us a kingdom.

Jesus said to Pilate in St. John’s Gospel: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” And the truth to which Jesus came to testify is this: that God is love, and that God expects us to act justly and to walk humbly with God.

And so it is delightfully appropriate for us to walk our annual pledges up to the altar on Christ the King Sunday. This in-gathering is more than just the results of a fund-drive, although that is an essential element. The pledges we will bring and bless are the offerings of our lives—all that we are and have—given back to the God who gave them to us. We are freely giving our hearts, minds, bodies and souls back to God, the Alpha and the Omega, the God who is, and who was and who is to come. God will take the gifts that we offer and transform those, and each one of us and this parish so that we will become increasingly Christ-like.

Over time, we become the image of God's self-giving love as a remedy for those trapped in self-absorption. We become an antidote for those captivated by an insatiably consumption-oriented culture. We become an alternative to a world in turmoil. Jesus promised to Pilate: "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." And as we listen, we increasingly embody what Pilate and so many do not yet hear: that we are enough. God has already made us worthy of love and honor and respect. We will radiate God's shalom—God's grace, peace and justice—as the light of Christ that the darkness can never overcome.

God's shalom will show through us in at least two ways. One is almost comically practical and mundane—worldly, even. We will keep the lights and heat on. We will keep the doors open and most of the floors dry. We will keep this place available as a haven of beauty, tranquility and hope in what feels like a darkening world to far too many people.

The second way that God's shalom will radiate through us relies on the first, but is perhaps a little more inspiring. In fact, it is exactly what the Revelation to John was intended to inspire in us. We will keep this place alive as a beacon of love, gratitude and peace. Love, in defiance of the self-importance that surrounds us in this world. Gratitude, in defiance of the consumption that surrounds us in this world. Peace, in defiance of the violence that surrounds us in this world because Christ the King has already conquered these powers.

We live in a world dominated by the perception that the only answer to violence is more violence. That does not mean that we all must become pacifists, like some of our brothers and sisters in Christ. So while there is something genuinely courageous about the stand that Mennonites, Quakers and some Brethren have taken, Episcopalians are not pacifists by dogma or doctrine. Instead, we tend to see the critical role that worldly authorities can play in establishing and maintaining justice, even as we watch for the limitations of order that is enforced by violence or the threat of violence.

Even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a champion of non-violence, once wrote: "There is nothing essentially wrong with power." But he wrote more, adding an

insight that I'd like to share with you. "The ultimate weakness of violence," Dr. King wrote, "is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."<sup>1</sup>

And so we celebrate light and love this morning. We celebrate the feast of Christ the King who loves us, the feast of the King who demonstrated power through weakness, the King who manifested strength through vulnerability, the King who established justice through mercy. We celebrate the feast of Christ the King and bring forward all that we are in this small but growing community of light and love.

And you are enough. We are enough.

We are, after all, an outpost of the kingdom of God. We keep the doors open and the lights on, both physically and spiritually, so that there is some place here, right now, that all those people who belong to the truth can listen to the voice of Christ our King.

Because we listen and respond to the voice of our King, we offer the chaotic world around us one humble place, one community of people that trusts that God's light will outshine any darkness, that God's love will overcome any hatred, and that, in time, God's justice will prevail for all creation.

"My kingdom is not *from* this world," Jesus said, "my kingdom is not *from* here." But make no mistake. The kingdom of God *is here* in this place, right here and now; in each and every human heart. And the best is yet to come.

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<sup>1</sup> King, Martin Luther, and Coretta Scott King. Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.