

“Cosmic Christ, Multicultural World,”
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Ephesians 1:15-23 Sermon
November 20, 2011
For Private Distribution Only

You may have noticed in your bulletins, that, in addition to this being Thanksgiving Sunday, it is also what is known as Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. I did not highlight the Reign of Christ last November, nor, to my knowledge, have my recent predecessors, so here's a little background: The Feast of Christ the King is a relatively recent addition to the church calendar. It was the result of an encyclical issued by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a response to 20th Century Italy's developing secularism and, most specifically, to the politics of Benito Mussolini. In 1969, under Pope Paul VI, the feast day was moved to the last Sunday of the Church Year, and it was given the highest rank, a solemnity. Following Vatican II, the feast made its way into Anglican and Lutheran lectionaries, and eventually into the Revised Common Lectionary, which the UCC and many other protestant denominations follow.¹ That said, today is virtually jam packed with reasons to celebrate: It is Thanksgiving. It is the Church's New Year's Eve. And it is the feast day of Christ the King. Happy Everything!

But now you may be wondering why, up until now, we have not observed the Reign of Christ. I can only speak for myself, but I would imagine that my predecessors felt similarly. Within the context of world history and my progressive Christian faith, images of Christ as king over *all* of the earth's peoples have been problematic to me. How many people have killed or died for this image? How many cultures have been conquered and virtually decimated? How many arbitrary borders have been drawn and on how many continents? Way too many, in my estimation. This history of our faith cannot be anywhere near the correct answer to that perennial question, WWJD... All this to say, that, when the Reign of Christ pops up in the lectionary, I'm more apt

¹Hiller, Michael T.: <http://breakopenword.blogspot.com/2011/11/last-sunday-after-pentecost-christ-king.html>.

to hang my head in shame and pass it by than to bring it to peoples' attention in any intentional way. This year was going to be the same. This was just going to be another Thanksgiving sermon. But apparently the Holy Spirit had other plans for us. In my study and discernment over this past week, all roads seemed to lead to Christ the King. So here we are in what, for some of us, is unfamiliar territory. But, as with so many things, there is more than one side to this story. There are multiple interpretations and worldviews. We don't have to settle for the one that has done so much harm or the one that would exclude so many good people from the kingdom of God. We don't have to hang our heads in shame.

There is some debate as to the authorship of Ephesians, with the largest percentage of scholars now believing that it was a pseudonymous author who wrote under Paul's name. Also in question are its intended recipients. Although the bible says these words were meant for the church at Ephesus, some early manuscripts contain no addressee. Furthermore, no specific names or issues at the church are mentioned in the letter. And so some have speculated that this was a "circular" letter: a letter that could be—and probably was—sent to a variety of churches. What all these churches likely had in common was some level of tension between the Jewish and the newer Gentile believers who comprised "all the saints." And so the author has called them, not to focus on their differences, but to a shared hope and faith in a Christ who bridges all of the gaps and rules over all.

As far as the troublesome image of Christ as a king goes, we may want to keep a few things in mind. As we know, in those days kingship was associated with divinity. Raising Christ up as king placed him over all human royalty as the one true King born of a divine lineage. Not a king in the usual sense, but a king who reflects the works and the values of the historical Jesus: A salt-

of-the-earth king, a subversive king, a king who heals, a king who loves God, his neighbor, and justice; a humble king who will knowingly die a criminal's death to make a point, and rise again to redeem the same world that killed him. Not your run-of-the-mill ruler at all...and perhaps the very opposite. Which brings me to another point: Many of us have been raised believing that, were Jesus to walk into the sanctuary this morning with a visitor's "Hello, my name is" badge on his robe, it would say "Jesus Christ." What we may not realize is that "Christ" is a title, not a last name. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "messiah" or "anointed one." *Another* version of king.

Some contemporary theologians have suggested that even this definition of Christ is too narrow. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr uses several New Testament passages to demonstrate that Christ is both universal and eternal. One passage falls just a few verses before our text for today:

Ephesians 1:3-4 says, "Blessed be the God and Parent of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love." (NRSV)

Another is the opening of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:1-4, NRSV) According to Father Rohr, what these texts tell us is that "What the Christ means is the confluence of divinity and physicality, spirit and matter. When the material and spiritual worlds coexist, we have Christ."²

Christ, it would seem, is far more than the head of our faith and our UCC denomination, far more than a title for a human king or even a God. Christ *is* cosmology. Christ *is* creation. Christ *is* the

²Heffern, Rich: "The Eternal Christ in the Cosmic Story," *National Catholic Reporter*, <http://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/eternal-christ-cosmic-story>, December 11, 2009.

first light at creation and the light that shines over all of creation today. Christ is the light that shines in each one of us. Christ transcends Christianity. Meet the Cosmic Christ.

Why are many of us meeting this Christ for the first time this morning? According to former Dominican and now Episcopalian priest Matthew Fox, this image of the Christ has been obscured by fruits of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution: scientific investigation, industrial development, and medical advances. With the new knowledge and discoveries, the universe suddenly lost its sacredness and came to be viewed as more technical and machinelike than awesome and mystical. And, at the same time, the Western world began to think in more individualistic terms, leading many Christians to focus specifically on personal salvation, often at the cost of the health of God's creation, human and nonhuman. In his creation-based spirituality, Fox asserts that we need to re-imagine a living cosmology for our time. He writes, "The holy trinity of science (or knowledge of creation), mysticism (or experiential union with creation and its un-nameable mysteries), and art (or expression of our awe at creation) is what constitutes a living cosmology."³

Where does *this* Reign of Christ leave the rest of the world's faiths and cultures? Matthew Fox believes THAT this Cosmic Christ connects us to *all* peoples and that it is a principle discernable within the wisdom traditions of *all* world religions. He calls the movement to unleash this universal wisdom for the common good "deep ecumenism" and believes the heart of the Cosmic Christ is the figure of Jesus as Sophia or Wisdom. For Fox this is the perfect bridge between Christianity and other faiths.⁴ Clearly it is also a way to connect our faith even more directly to

³Boulton, Wayne G.: "The Thoroughly Modern Mysticism of Matthew Fox," *Christian Century*, April 28, 1990, pp. 428-432.

⁴Ibid.

our social, political, and environmental stances. Bringing us into greater and greater integrity as individuals and creation.

So today let us celebrate the Reign of Christ, perhaps this Cosmic Christ and all that it can mean for the Church and the world. Let us be thankful that ours is a tradition deeper and richer and more dynamic than we can begin to imagine. Let us be grateful that divinity speaks through all religions and beings and that we can honor those other cultures and faiths without disavowing our own.

And as we move into the darkness and the waiting of the Advent season, let us be bearers of Christ's light to the world and all creation.

Amen.