

Sermon Nov 20 2022, the Rev. Linda Hoddy

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 72:1-4, 6-7 Jesus as King of Our Lives

<sup>1</sup>Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. <sup>2</sup>May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. <sup>3</sup>May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. <sup>4</sup>May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. <sup>6</sup>May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. <sup>7</sup>In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 1:11-20 (The Voice)

Strengthen them with Your infinite power, according to Your glorious might, so that they will have everything they need to hold on and endure hardship patiently and joyfully. Thank You, Father, as You have made us eligible to receive our portion of the inheritance given to all those set apart by the light. You have rescued us from dark powers and brought us safely into the kingdom of Your Son, whom You love and in whom we are redeemed and forgiven of our sins. He is the exact image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation, the eternal. It was by Him that everything was created: the heavens, the earth, all things within and upon them, all things seen and unseen, thrones and dominions, spiritual powers and authorities. Every detail was crafted through His design, by His own hands, and for His purposes. He has always been! It is His hand that holds everything together. He is the head of this body, the church. He is the beginning, the first of those to be reborn from the dead, so that in every aspect, at every view, in everything—He is first. God was pleased that all His fullness should forever dwell in the Son who, as predetermined by God, bled peace into the world by His death on the cross as God's means of reconciling to Himself the whole creation—all things in heaven and all things on earth.

SERMON: “The Big and Long ‘Yes!’” The Rev. Linda Hoddy

To begin, I invite you to close your eyes and listen to this prayer, in the form of a poem by e.e. cummings:

*I thank you God for most this amazing day:  
For the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
And a blue true dream of sky;  
And for everything which is natural which is infinite  
Which is yes*

*(I who have died am alive again today,  
And this is the sun's birthday;  
This is the birth day of life and of love and wings;  
And of the gay great happening illimitably earth)*

*How should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any—  
Lifted from the no of all nothing—human merely being*

*Doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake*

*And*

*Now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

Cumming's poem is a long way, so far, so so far, from the Church of God in which I grew up, in a small town in Kansas. In that faith tradition, the big "yes" was conversion. Instant salvation. Are you saved, they would ask? In theory, one "got saved" by going up during an altar to accept Jesus into one's heart. And every time Brent uses that hymn, "Just as I Am," I am back in the Church of God in the altar call. Those hymns are powerful. Conversion was hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime event, unless, of course, one backslid into sin. And there were many sins: drinking, dancing, smoking, going to movies, gambling. For women, wearing pants or make-up or skirts above the knee. Answering the altar call to go down and be saved was the big moment, the momentous turning, the big yes! And henceforth, Jesus would reign in one's heart and over one's life, and one would therefore be empowered to resist all temptation and sin.

Only, it didn't really work out that well. Life turned out to be a lot more complicated than that. Somehow sin and temptation were still there. And once I went to college and learned about other religions, I just couldn't fit my life into that box any more.

So, like many of my generation, I wandered through agnosticism and atheism and a little Buddhism and Hinduism and yoga, and even became a Unitarian Universalist minister, where I was free to roam through all religions, embracing truth "wherever it was found." But after twenty years of that, I once again felt that something was missing. I wanted something deeper. It too turned out to be a box that I didn't fit into any more. I could not, within a strict Rational Humanism, account for the mystical experiences I had had. They seemed like experiences of God, but most of the Unitarians that I interacted with didn't believe in or talk about God, and did not want to hear me talk about God. So I longed for, I yearned, for something deeper, and wondered where to look.

Well, what about that Christianity of my childhood? Maybe. Maybe I could "critically re-appropriate" or "reconstruct the deconstruction," as they said at Divinity school. Meaning, look at it through new eyes, through a different frame. I had a growing suspicion that in throwing out Christianity, the baby had gone out with the bath water.

In my search, I was drawn to training in Spiritual Direction. I had always loved that part of ministry. I never tired of sitting with someone in my office, talking about their spiritual lives, their doubts, their struggles to forgive, trying to make sense of evil and suffering, longing for something which gave their lives purpose and meaning.

So, I went to the Shalem Institute for training in Spiritual Direction. It was a rigorous program – two years of much reading and writing on my own, and three two-week residencies in person with faculty and other students.

Part of the program was to explore many different spiritual practices, many different forms of prayer. One of those was “praying with icons.” I had never prayed with icons. I barely knew what an icon is. But I was willing to give it a try.

So, one evening, the staff brought into the library of the monastery in which we were meeting, several icons, beautiful images, paintings of holy scenes or persons, and placed them around the room. They kind of created stations with the icon and candles surrounding it, and dimmed the lights of the room. And they invited us to choose an icon, and sit in front of it, in an attitude of prayer, gazing upon it, for at least a half hour. The idea was to open ourselves to whatever came, although, if desired, we could pose a question to the icon.

I chose the icon known as the Sinai Christ, partly because it is believed to be one of the earliest images of Jesus. It was painted in the sixth century, probably in Constantinople. In the painting, Jesus’ eyes are not focused on the same thing, so one side is thought to represent the human aspects of Jesus, and the other is thought to represent his Godly essence. It is also known as Christ the Pantocrator – or ruler of all.

So anyway, I sat down in front of the painting, relaxed as best I could, and posed the question, “Do I need to go back to Christianity?”

After a while – I have no idea how long... the image began to change. Instead of the original face, which looks like the face of a middle-eastern man, long nose, long hair... the face began to, as we would say today, “morph”. If it were on a television screen, the face of the man would fade out, and then another face would fade. I saw a child, I saw a wrinkled old woman wearing a headscarf like Jesus might have worn, I saw a man in rags on pavement, I saw a woman in a kitchen baking, I saw a regal-looking man in some sort of uniform with golden braid, I saw a monk in a robe, then a man who looked like he worked in a bank on Wall Street.

The mood was light, almost playful. And the answer, to my question, “Do I need to go back to Christianity?” The answer was, “If you want to. But you see, I am in everyone. I am everyone.”

Well, I was pretty blown away. I didn’t know what to think. My rational Unitarian Universalist mind was spinning. And in desperation, I asked the leader of the session about it. Had she ever heard of such a thing? Was I losing my mind? Was I hallucinating? She smiled slightly, looked off in the distance and said, “People often report that the images come alive.” But she wasn’t willing to give me any definitive answers to what had happened.

That was in 2011. In 2012 I retired from my ministry of 17 years in Saratoga Springs, and my husband and I moved to the Berkshires. We church shopped for the first year, eventually settling on this church for a number of reasons – music, architecture, proximity to the Catholic cemetery where all my husband’s relatives are buried, a newly

ordained, enthusiastic minister. But most important of all, there seemed to be an aliveness of spirit, a live spirituality, and an engaged congregation.

And I began to rather tentatively say “yes” to the Christianity of my childhood, although it is in a rather different form. I still struggle to wrap my mind around atonement theology, and I chafe against Christianity’s tendencies to imperialism – Christ the King can easily slide into Christ Pantocrator, or a conflation of church and state. I don’t want to go there. I chafe against Christianity’s claims to exclusivity – we have the only truth, we have the only way to God.

So, part of the big, long yes, is “Yes to Christianity.” But it’s also saying “yes” to life. It’s being grateful for all that life brings, the sorrows as well as the joys, the doubts as well as the faith, the challenges as well as the triumphs. I like e.e. cummings’ poem for its acknowledgement of the crucifixion – “I who have died am alive again today.” In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul said, “I die daily.” Sometimes I think of that as overcoming my ego, which is a long process—of saying no to materialism, no to violence, no to hoarding wealth, no to sorting people into categories of worthy and unworthy. And then saying Yes, to a life oriented to God, to living as Jesus lived, with generosity of spirit as well as goods. It’s a very big, and very long “yes.”

Life can crucify us. It can give us so much pain that we think we are going to die, and may even wish to die, and yet, there will be a way through to new life.

I have always loved the writings of the Sufi mystic poet Rumi. He has a little poem called The Guest House: It goes like this:

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
Some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,  
Who violently sweep your house  
Empty of its furniture,  
Still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
For some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
Meet them at the door laughing  
And invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,*

*Because each has been sent  
As a guide from beyond.*

When I read that for the first time, in my 30s probably, I was pretty nonplussed. What do you mean “Be grateful for whoever comes?” How can I be grateful for all these sorrows? How can I be grateful for the war in Ukraine, or the death of a friend by suicide, or a diagnosis of a terminal illness, or the deterioration of my body as I age?

It’s easy to be grateful, to sing God’s praises when everything is going well -- when we have a loving family and a warm home and plenty of food and money and strong minds and bodies and lots of pleasurable activities. It’s easy to say yes to those.

But what about when we don’t have those? The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, knows that a mature faith doesn’t disappear when those sorrows, and griefs, and challenges come. He prayed for those early church folks, “God, strengthen them with your infinite power, according to YOUR will, so that they will have everything they need to hold on and endure hardship patiently and joyfully.”

“Be grateful for whoever comes,” says Rumi, “because these sorrows may be clearing us out for some new delight.”

Cancer survivors will sometimes say, “Cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me.” At first glance, it seems a rather strange thing to say. Why do they say it? Because it “clears them out for something new.” It re-arranges their priorities, and renews their sense of purpose. It sweeps them clean of shallow, materialistic concerns.

I stood at the death bed of a friend last week. She was no longer conscious, unable to speak. We were alone in the room, and I thought about how all the concerns of the world receded during those moments. All the political turmoil surrounding elections, and the war in Ukraine, and the drought in the west, and climate change. All of that seemed insignificant, unimportant. And all that mattered in those moments near death were the gifts of love that she had shared during a long life – children and grandchildren loved, and music composed and played, and students taught, and friendship shared. I thanked God for her life, and I thanked her, saying “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” You said yes to life over and over again, and now you may say yes to rest.

Saying yes to life and faith is not something we do once. It’s something we do throughout our lives, as we grow to trust in God, to trust that our sorrow will deepen into compassion, that our doubts can increase our understanding and strengthen our faith. And yes, we even say yes to death. For as Ecclesiasticus told us: There is a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to hold on. A time to let go.

A couple of weeks ago I sat across a table from a friend who was grieving the death of a 40-year friendship. The friend of my friend had evidently been building up anger for years, but had not shared it, until it exploded like a bomb, and destroyed in

moments what had been built over decades. As I listened to my friend pour out her grief, I thought, I am so grateful for a faith that calls me to forgive and reconcile, that encourages us to imitate God's grace – forgiving others as we have been forgiven.

My husband and I have been watching *The Crown* during the evenings lately. Our old eyes are tired, so we often settle side by side on the couch to watch television. One night this week, there was a tender moment between Queen Elizabeth and her husband, Prince Phillip. They are in the space which connects their separate bedchambers, and he is gazing lovingly at her. The queen is surprised, and asks, "What's that look? I've never seen so many thoughts behind a person's eyes." He's quiet for a moment, and then he says, "Gratitude, appreciation." "What for?" she asks. "You make a better person of me." he said. "And you of me," she said. "Isn't that the point of marriage?" He smiles gently, kisses her on the forehead, says goodnight, and they turn to go to their separate sleeping chambers.

And I thought, "It's not just what marriage is for. It's also what religious community, it's what church is for." We make each other better persons by coming together here to learn not just about God and Jesus the Christ. Not just about the great transcendent God that Paul describes – the invisible God, firstborn of creation, the creator, the eternal. Not about Christ as a great earthly king in ermine robes and sandals of gold. We learn about the humble Jesus who never travelled far from home, who never had much money, who made no class distinctions, who always championed the poor and downtrodden, who died an ignominious death on a Roman cross. And yet, in the way he lived, he taught us so much about how to say yes to life.

Through following the way of Jesus, we learn here how to be together in community. We learn how to forgive and reconcile, how to grow through suffering, how to order our lives in ways that will give us meaning and purpose, and how to face death.

But it isn't an instantaneous conversion, not an easy "one and done." It's a life-long turning and re-turning toward God. It's a surrender, an obeisance, a discernment of God's will that happens over and over, and requires renewing commitment.

I begin each day "in gratitude", writing in my journal at least five things for which I am grateful. I've been doing it now for probably twenty years. It has shaped my life more than anything else I've done, because gratitude has the lens through which I see the world. It has awakened me, opened my eyes. I can now see that there are always blessings abounding, even in the midst of challenges. I recommend it. Find things every day for which you can be grateful. It can shape the way you move through life. I try to end the day by asking, "How did I experience God's grace and blessing today?" What was my greatest challenge? And where might be the blessing in that challenge? Where is God in this situation?

If we are to "hold on" and "endure hardship patiently and joyfully," we will have to say "yes," to whatever guests come, and trust that they are clearing us out for

something new. Thankfully, we have congregations like this one to help us along the way.

I hope you'll keep saying yes, saying thank you for every "amazing day", "everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes."