

Called to Love: The Prophetic Voice of the Book of Revelation
Fourth Sunday of Easter | Year C | Revelation 7:9-17 | May 8, 2022
Rev. Samm Melton-Hill | Highlands Lutheran Church | Denver, CO

Sun. May 8 — Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings

Acts 9:36-43

Psalms 23 (1)

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Prayer of the Day

O God of peace, you brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep. By the blood of your eternal covenant, make us complete in everything good that we may do your will, and work among us all that is well-pleasing in your sight, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia. Jesus says, I am | the good shepherd.

I know my own and my | own know me. Alleluia. (John 10:14)

Color: White

Second Reading: Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Gospel: John 13:31-35

After washing the disciples' feet, predicting his betrayal, and then revealing his betrayer, Jesus speaks of his glorification on the cross. This deep complicated love of Jesus, even to death on the cross, will be the distinctive mark of Jesus' community.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In the Name of the God whose love has made, and saves, and aids us, amen.¹

During my very first semester of grad school the dining hall workers on campus went on strike because the school was not negotiating a new contract with them in good faith. The school was refusing to pay a living wage in one of the most expensive cities in the country, did not offer any paid time off, and refused to provide adequate health care. It is perhaps important to note that this is also one of the most prestigious and wealthiest schools in the country: none other than Harvard.

At the time, I just felt lucky to be here. Just a few weeks into my program, I still felt as though somehow someone misread my application and accidentally let me in. I had just moved from Kentucky to Boston and still wondered when they were going to realize their mistake and kick me out. And yet at the same time that I was feeling such pride and privilege for being at this school, the university dining hall workers went on strike.

Within my first month on campus, I began to see the underbelly of the Harvard empire. It quickly became clear that the Ivy League image only extended to certain groups of people and my disillusionment soon set in.

My classmates quickly began participating in picket lines, prayer services, and organizing childcare for the workers who were striking. I joined strikes and heard stories of our dining hall workers who were struggling simply to feed their children, working seven days a week,

¹ The Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts, PH.D.. "The Ends of Love." *Harvard Memorial Church*. 3 October 2021.

commuting hours by bus each way, and yet still showing up to work with a true smile and friendly face, serving students like me hot meals all day.

Harvard is an odd place in of itself, but it is difficult to stress how much of campus and undergraduate life revolves around the dining halls. The main hall quite literally looks like a scene out of Harry Potter and it is the social hub for undergrad students. Professors and upperclassmen have their own private dining halls, as do the graduate schools. So, this strike had a huge impact on nearly everyone on campus. It forced all of us to take a step back and look at the systems we so enthusiastically participate in.

My time on the picket line exposed me to stories I had never imagined before and it instilled in me a new and profound appreciation for my own family's identity as a union worker family. This also happened to be the first time in my life that I recall hearing true prophetic preaching taking place in this resistance against the mighty and powerful.

Many of those I grew to know were immigrants to the United States and they were the first ones to tell me the stories of their family members and relatives who fought similar fights alongside leaders like Cesar Chavez during the California Grape Workers' Strike in 1965. Prophetic voices, speaking to the marginalized, oppressed, and poor have existed throughout history.

For myself, the Harvard dining hall workers were some of those voices. These are the voices that turned my attention away from the high towers of privilege and towards the suffering of God's people on the ground. Perhaps for you, it was someone like Martin Luther King Jr., Sylvia Rivera, Malcolm X, Jane Roe also known as Norma McCorvey, or Ciara Taylor. Or maybe, you've yet to experience such prophetic voices and you're still keeping an ear out for them.

Similar to all of these prophetic voices, the writer of the book of Revelation, a man believed to be named John, is not writing to some far off future audience, but is instead speaking directly to the communities of his time. This John was one of those prophetic voices that the vulnerable, marginalized, and the scared, the fearful would have been listening for.

So often, the book of Revelation and all of its oddities are believed to represent the end times, heard through apocalyptic televangelists on our television. But, this is not the case at all. This is

not a text resembling some science fiction writing, but instead it is a text of resistance. It is truly a radical, prophetic, book written to the people of its time.

The Book of Revelation is a letter written to “7 churches made up of poor and marginalized folks trying to survive, resist, and refuse assimilation into the Roman empire.”² Its purpose is to unmask the powers of the empire, to reveal its evil intentions, to both explain and inspire these communities to continue to resist their oppression.

Rachel Held Evans reminds us that “there was much speculation in John’s day about who this “son of man” might be.³ The expectation for the Messiah was that they would “rise up among the Jewish people, liberate them from their oppressors, and establish a just, righteous kingdom that, unlike every other empire, would endure forever.” She reminds us that to our modern ears, the proclamation of Jesus as king, particularly over and against the Roman Empire, “has become a mainstay of religious [language so much so that] we hardly [notice] we’re participating in resistance rhetoric when we say it. Doing or saying something “in the name of Jesus” speaks in defiant contrast to edicts carried out “in the name of Caesar” or “in the name of the king” or “by the authority of the president.” When we declare “in Jesus’ name,” we are renouncing the power that the so-called sovereign leaders claim. A once radical phrase, “In Jesus’ name,” risks feeling common, dispassionate, impartial, and even nonpartisan now.

In this text John is calling these communities to see that God is already with them. Simply put, to draw attention to the ways in which following Christ offers them, and us, a new worldview that topples all of the power structures and expectations that had previously been set before us by people with power, like the Roman Empire. To John’s audience, this sounded like liberation. But, to those with power, it sounded threatening.

Revelation is inspiring and directive, but it is also a visionary text.⁴ It lays out a vision of practices, images, liturgy, and economics that stand in contrast to Caesar’s empire and points its readers to a vision of humanity rooted in the anti-imperial image of the crucified Christ. In this

² C. Wess Daniels. “Commentary on Revelation 7:9-17.” *Working Preacher*. 8 May 2022.

³ Rachel Held Evans. “Resistance Stories” in *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. Nelson Books: Nashville, TN. (2018). 139.

⁴ Ibid.

reading, the slain Lamb represents the unconditional love and grace of God that breaks through any and all barriers put in its place. Yes, this is a radical spiritual message, but it should not be forgotten that it is also a radical political message. The political message is one of liberation; the lamb of God, that “son of man,” the Messiah that these people are looking and waiting for, is already here. But, man, if you are powerful and wealthy, that sure does sound threatening.

In this excerpt from Revelation, we hear how John “understands that the empire has its own mode of social formation, its own “vision” of community.”⁵ This sense of community in the empire is often defined by “us versus them” categories. And while the United States is not the Roman Empire, this should still sound familiar. “The empire needs concepts of borders and boundaries to exist. And it needs to continue to reinforce them at every step of the way. If you want what is good about the empire you must comply. If you do not comply you will be removed,” literally, socially, financially. This is why prophetic people like Cesar Chavez and Sylvia Rivera and others are so threatening to so many people. Because, they have seen a new world in which borders, divisions, and the “us vs. them” paradigm doesn’t have to exist. Just like John, the writer of Revelation, they are the voices that turn our attention away from protecting ours and others’ privilege, and towards the suffering of God’s people.

But it is not just the leaders themselves that are so threatening, most important instead it’s their ability to create community, their ability to grow the multitude. In the text, the multitude is simply the community, those that follow the new worldview of Jesus. It is the community itself, when together, that threatens the status quo, that bores this radical message.

This is perhaps the most important message from Revelation today: “The image of the multitude...subverts this subdivision of humanity. The multitude is rooted in a vision of “all” and holds out the possibility of a way of being a community that does not need to be over and against others in order to exist.” Professor Wess Daniels sees “the multitude here being rooted not in antagonism but in nonviolence and anti-imperial practices like sacrificial love.”

The Gospel of John speaks of this sacrificial love for us today, the answer to resisting the powerful and protecting the vulnerable, is a love like Jesus. A simple answer perhaps, but a difficult one to carry out.

⁵ Ibid.

When placed together, the reading of Revelation and our Gospel message from John offers a deeper understanding of what love looks like in this difficult and divided world. It helps us to take a conversation from the political and the theoretical and to bring it down to us on the personal level, where we might start asking the right questions about how to love God's people.

I invite you to reflect on the questions that one of my favorite professors, Dr. Matt Potts, challenges us with. He shares that asking "When is it appropriate to sacrifice the vulnerable to power?" [is the] wrong question. The right question is, "How can my love protect the vulnerable from those in power?"⁶ This is the question our readings challenge us with today: "How can my love protect the vulnerable from those in power?"⁷

This week, I invite you into the vision of Revelation. We are reminded that any decisions we Christians make, any positions or beliefs we hold, and any actions we take should be made with attention to how our love can protect those who are at risk, including ourselves, in many cases.⁸ Asking, how do I take part in this new world vision offered to us by Jesus? Am I one of those who would have resisted John's message at the time, or would I have found myself in his audience? Does this vision feel threatening and scary or liberating and freeing to me?

"How can my love protect the vulnerable from those in power?"⁹

May we carry this message of Christ into our week with thoughtfulness and with love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

⁶ The Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts, PH.D.. "The Ends of Love." Harvard Memorial Church. 3 October 2021.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts, PH.D.. "The Ends of Love." Harvard Memorial Church. 3 October 2021.