

*Rejoice in the Promise*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*November 21, 2021 Twenty-Sixth and Last Sunday after Pentecost*  
*Thanksgiving Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday*  
*from Isaiah 11:1-9; from Ezekiel 34:11-27; Matthew 25:31-46*

**Call to Worship:** We do not often read the longer version of our Future Directions Vision statement (because it's long!) but listen to its beautiful first paragraph, and think of this both in terms of Thanksgiving, what you are grateful for, and in terms of the Reign of Christ, the creation of a world that lives by the laws of love that Jesus taught. Here it is:

The United Church of Strafford aspires to be a welcoming congregation of open doors, hearts and minds, accepting our imperfections, embracing our differences and other cultures and traditions, and maintaining freedom to choose beliefs as individuals while living up to the name United Church. We want to be a place of faithful Christ-like love to which anyone who needs spiritual, personal or material support can turn, a beloved community connecting deeply and sharing honestly our joys and concerns, honoring and celebrating the experience of our elders and helping to raise the children of the town, a warm nest for us to land in when we are new to the church that becomes in time our spiritual home and extended family.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*,

Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants... If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.

These quotes capture the spirit both of Thanksgiving and Reign of Christ Sunday. Our greatest hope is that humans will become grateful for the whole world and choose to live by the compassion and Golden Rule that all traditions teach, and thereby create a global community of all people and all the earth that is similar to the community we are trying to create in our church.

Each year on Thanksgiving Sunday we begin with the words of Psalm 95, the beautiful King James Version language:

O come, let us sing unto the Lord:  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.  
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving,  
and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms....

In his hand are the deep places of the earth:  
the strength of the hills is his also.  
The sea is his, and he made it:  
and his hands formed the dry land....  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand.

Let us worship together...

**Time with the Children:** Good morning! Have you ever played the game “I spy with my little eye?” When my daughter Cary was little we played it in the car. Today I want to play it, with some differences.

This time I’m going to say a color and I’d like you to name anything you see that is that color. This is the last Sunday of the church season of Pentecost, and the color for Pentecost is green, So “I spy with my little eye something green...” What do you see that’s green?

OK, now I’m going to get a little tricky. “I spy with my little eye something Thanksgiving!” So it could be something that reminds you of the holiday Thanksgiving, or it could be anything you are grateful for that makes you want to say Thank You for it... No wrong answers!

OK, now we are going to get really tricky. “I spy with my little eye something Jesus.” Let’s talk about that for a second. What do you think of when you think of Jesus as a person or teacher? And where do you see evidence of his presence?

One of the reasons we come to church is to help us learn to see Jesus in people and other creatures and places and things in the world. The more we practice looking the more we see. And the more things we do that are like Jesus, the more there will be to see!

Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of Advent, my favorite time of year, really magical and beautiful as we lead up to Christmas, and one of the things we will hear Jesus say is to be wide awake and watchful so we can see and love the world and know how to use our gifts to make it better.

There is something we can do to help us be more mindful and loving and see God everywhere—I wonder if anyone can guess...

Pray! Jesus said to wait and watch and *pray*. Prayer can open our eyes to see things differently if we open our hearts as we do it.

Let us pray together the Lord’s Prayer...

## **Sermon: *Rejoicing in the Promise***

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the realm of God.”

We can look around the world today and wish that children were in charge, the children in the streets of Glasgow, the refugee children at the border of Poland or Texas. We do not have the world our children want and deserve, and that can make Thanksgiving hard to celebrate and the Reign of Christ hard to believe, it can make gratitude and hope difficult to come by sometimes, but today we remember the beautiful promise we have heard from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jesus and prophets and poets of all spiritual traditions that the possibility is within our grasp to create the realm of God and the rule of Christ’s laws of love on earth.

We need to become like children to enter that realm, and the first way is to be humble enough to believe in a higher power that can bring about the human evolution needed to transform and save our world, to believe enough to rejoice in that hope and let it inspire us to do the work required to make it happen.

The early church saw this evolution not as a childish fantasy, but as a universal law. They saw a pattern in all nature that they recognized as the sacred way of the Spirit that leads toward harmonious convergence, and ultimately the oneness needed for humanity truly to love our neighbor and our planet as our self.

This pattern is described in Christian contemplative tradition by four words from New Testament Greek: kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia. It is a progression from kenosis, meaning humble self-emptying, to metanoia, meaning the transformation and expansion of consciousness, to agape, the limitless capacity for love and oneness, to koinonia, the creation of the beloved community, an incursion of the realm of God or reign of Christ into our world.

This is a law of nature. If I empty myself of self in any situation, my consciousness and perspective momentarily change in a way that expands my empathy, compassion and love, and that in turn draws me into connection and community, using my gifts in a way that serves the wellbeing and oneness of the world around me.

We can rejoice in the promise that if we follow this sacred way, we will be continually creating the realm of God, moment by moment.

And yet it takes childlike wisdom to believe it. We need to undergo humble kenosis just to believe in kenosis.

Once upon a time there was a village of acorns that celebrated the beauty and strength of their shells and the stylishness of their jaunty caps.

Then a blue jay dropped a half-rotten, cracked, capless acorn. They were disgusted by him, but he laughed and said, “I used to be like you. Then I learned the truth. We are not born to be acorns. We are born to be that!” And he pointed at the great tree towering over them.

“But in order to become that we have to crack open and rot, we have to die as acorns to be reborn as oaks.” They all scoffed at how unbelievable that was and turned back to rejoicing in the pride of their acorn selves.

We learn, eventually. Life teaches us that we need to empty and transcend our self. Millions have come to the wisdom of kenosis by hitting rock bottom in their addictions and stumbling into a 12 Step group. They turn their will and their life over to their higher power, cracking open and dying to their old self and allowing their truer and better self to emerge.

Kenosis leads to metanoia; self-emptying to a new way of seeing and being. The Sufi poet and mystic Rumi called this, “to die before you die.” We practice it in mindfulness and meditation, or heartfulness and centering prayer, or when we love and serve others as Jesus described in today’s gospel passage, when we see and love the goodness and sacredness of all, unconditionally, as in Isaiah.

I’ve told the story before of the monastery that was dying out. The six remaining brothers begged their abbot to talk to a hermit who was reputed to be spiritually deep, but the hermit said he had nothing to offer other than this: that the messiah was among them.

The abbot came back feeling hopeless. He shared what the hermit said and the brothers felt hopeless, too.

But over the coming weeks they found themselves thinking, you know, the abbot is so wise, he actually could be the messiah. Or Brother James has such a gift for compassion and healing, he could be the messiah.

They noticed the best qualities in each monk and began to treat one another with greater respect and love. It was an ancient monastery, so people came to tour the architecture and grounds, and as young visitors witnessed the reverence the monks had for one another, they, too,

saw the Spirit within them. First one joined the order and then others. Within a few years the monastery was thriving again.

The monks had undergone kenosis and metanoia and developed a greater capacity for seeing God in those around them and responding with love. Their mutual love created a community, koinonia, that attracted people to its light and served those who came within its reach.

Jesus said that the realm of God is like a mustard seed. It starts as the smallest of things—just humble love—but it spreads and grows and takes over the whole field.

Jesus promises, the prophets promise, I promise you that if you go through your days practicing this path moment to moment, moving many times a day through kenosis and metanoia to agape and koinonia, you will live in the realm of God on earth, and you will co-create it around you, and if more and more of us do this together, we may live to see our children's world saved and transformed and ruled by love.

This is the hope, this is the promise, and we can rejoice in it because it is in our reach. We can create it today, here, in this church, the reign of Christ's love, a little realm of God, and we can go home and create it with our families and neighbors, and we can help spread it across this nation and world.

Let us pray in silence, feeling how fervently we hope for that vision to come to pass, and giving thanks and rejoicing in its promise...

**Haiku by Herbert Goertz:**

The apples are gone  
but the full moon hangs yellow  
in the bare branches.