



Becoming Christ's New Creation

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
The Feast of St. Francis, October 3, 2021
Matthew 11:25-30*

Two weeks ago I was very blessed to be able to attend what was called a “Planetary Healing Retreat” at Liberty Community Church. Liberty is a predominantly African American church in North Minneapolis whose primary ministries revolve around healing from various kinds of trauma, including racism and sex trafficking. Recently, one of their co-pastors, Alika Galloway, felt the Spirit leading her to begin to expand their vision to include planetary healing. She felt that all the healing in the world of every other kind would not be worth anything if we didn’t begin to heal our relationship with the earth. This ultimately led to the retreat I attended two weeks ago, at which I’m proud to say that a group from St. John’s came to cook and serve a meal.

Culminating a beautiful weekend of learning and music, conversation and prayer, we met that Sunday for a worship service on the banks of the Mississippi in Minneapolis. And at one point in the service a woman came up to sing. For some reason she was really struggling. She couldn’t pull the words up on her phone, and maybe something else was going on too—I’m not sure. But she was upset and couldn’t get the words out. So the worship leader kept playing music, and he began to reassure her. Then a few others got up and gathered around her. They encouraged her, and someone found an iPad and pulled up the words on the screen.

Everyone was patient. Everyone told her to take her time. The congregation became this living entity holding space together, waiting until she was ready. And eventually she did sing beautifully. And I thought, now that is church. It was a small and humble example of what true Beloved Community—Jesus’ Way of Love—looks like. It may have been in a brand new setting outside at the river, even though people have been gathering at the river to worship for as long as people have lived on this earth. It may have felt brand new, really learning deeply to connect our faith with our deep love for the earth, and recognizing how very much we need to heal our relationship with her. But it was as authentic an expression of the heart of faith as anything I’ve seen in church buildings. It was all about togetherness, not “me” but “us”.

In today’s gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus says this:

Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Well I don’t know about you, but when I move through my days without being conscious and mindful, it’s all too easy to get stressed and to over-effort and work too hard, even following Jesus’ Way of Love.

But Jesus insists that if we will take his yoke upon us, we will find rest for our souls. In the time of Jesus, to “take on a rabbi’s yoke” meant to take on that rabbi’s teachings. But as I listen to this scripture, what stands out to me as especially beautiful isn’t so much what it is to follow Jesus’ teachings. It’s the image, not of myself taking on a yoke all by myself, but

of Jesus coming alongside me and bearing the yoke together. It's the promise of God getting up close and personal in our struggles and sharing the burden. In the difficulties of life, if we seek to be like Christ, seeking to be more loving and more generous, we will find Christ right beside us, teaching and encouraging and gentle. In the end, this is about moving from seeing only "me," and instead understanding that in every sense, there is a "we"—beginning with the presence of the living God.

In practice, I'd say this looks something like what I saw two weeks ago at the river, when the people of Liberty Church loved their friend through her struggle until she could sing again. I believe that is what Jesus is offering to us. Not just ethical principles. Not just general guidelines for living. But the sacred intimacy of the actual presence of God, who comes alongside us with kindness and strength, showing us the way forward when we don't know how to move or where to go. Jesus' Way of Love is about coming alongside each other like this, bearing each others' burdens. And showing each other and the world how things can be different.

Today is the feast of St. Francis. Later this afternoon at 4pm, you are all invited to bring your animal friends for a special blessing in honor of St Francis, since he was said to greatly love all of creation, including the birds and trees and sun and moon. Today is also the beginning of our annual four-week stewardship campaign when we invite people to make their pledges to the church. And this year's theme is "Becoming Christ's New Creation."

During these times when the whole world is in such transition in every way—with climate change, and the City of Minneapolis deciding how it

will shape public safety, and this ongoing pandemic, and everything else—I believe we can take heart by returning to the simple reason our church exists. Everything we do is for one purpose only. We exist to be transformed by Christ and to model his Way of Love in this world. We exist to be a kind of demonstration plot – an experiment, if you will—in living not competitively, but collaboratively. In using power with, not power over. To become Christ’s new creation means to demonstrate compassion and accountability together. To let go of neutrality in face of the pressing needs of our time, but also to reject self-serving righteous indignation that only demonstrates contempt and hatred of our enemies. In Christ’s new creation we learn to let go of zero sum game ways of doing justice and economic systems, and instead seek restorative justice and restorative allocation of resources for all people.

At the core, Christ’s “new creation” looks a lot like what Liberty Church did two weeks ago. It looks like Pastor Alike listening to the Spirit and expanding her vision of what healing needed to include. It looks like awakening to the earth as a living entity, our mother, and recognizing God asking us to heal our relationship with her. It looks like coming alongside one another with compassion and kindness when we struggle and make mistakes, and loving one another into wholeness. It looks like what our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is doing every day—I encourage you to follow him on Twitter¹—joining other faith leaders to advocate for compassionate legislation and policies in our nation’s capital.

So let me ask you this. What are you wrestling with in your own life? What do you think about when you’re not otherwise engaged—when you

¹ https://twitter.com/pb_curry

wake up in the morning or the middle of the night? Now, imagine that whatever that is is precisely the locus of Christ's new creation. Imagine that the Spirit of God is coming alongside you, just like Liberty church did for the woman when she was trying to sing. Imagine the Spirit of Christ is teaching you, with gentleness and humility, that there really is a third way beyond all the zero-sum options you might currently see. A way that always invites life and healing for all concerned. What might change in your situation?

Jesus' Way of Love is all-encompassing, from the smallest thought in our minds to the global political sphere. Because Jesus' Way of Love is about moving from seeing only "me" to truly recognizing "we". Let's really stretch our minds and hearts wide open to imagine "Becoming Christ's New Creation." We can't make this happen on our own steam. But by accepting the yoke of Jesus, allowing the presence of God's Spirit to come alongside us and teach us, everything new and healing becomes possible. This is what Jesus does for us, if only we have eyes to see it. This is what the Spirit is whispering to us, if only we have ears to hear it. This is what the Creator made us to do. Let us become Christ's new creation, together. Amen.