

Sermon preached on November 21, 2021 – Christ the King Sunday

By The Rev. Anne C. Fowler

St Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME

Revelation 1:4b-8

Psalm 93

John 18:33-37

Christ the King, St Bart's

*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. ~ Psalm 19:14*

Grace to you and peace! Grace to you and peace!

I am not a fan of Christ the King Sunday. Much too much of the Church Militant and/or the Church Triumphant for my taste. As someone who has been struggling for decades to preach Church Penitent, I find all the Lords and Kings objectionable.

So I'm opting for Thanksgiving instead. And once I lighted on that idea, I knew immediately what I'm most immediately and recently thankful for this year. And that is the class of very new Mainers I'm helping to teach at South Portland Highschool.

Shortly after Sam and I moved back here in 2013 I began volunteering at the Telling Room, a non-profit in Portland that works with kids and writing. If you don't know of it I recommend looking at its website; it's a fabulous organization! I taught college grammar and writing for years before I was ordained, and I'd had the semi-formed plan that I'd like to work with kids and writing. I didn't know where to begin until a neighbor told me about the Telling Room. I've never looked back!

We work with kids in various constellations in the physical Telling Room on Commercial Street, we do programs in schools, and during Covid we've been doing online courses as well.

But this SoPo High class is a class like no other! We partnered with SoPo High thinking we would be helping with writing, which is what we know how to do. Not teaching ESL, which is NOT what we do. But what we've encountered is a class of very new Mainers who are not equipped to write in English at all.

Because most of them can't *speak* much English. Some Portuguese, some Spanish, some French, Haitian Creole, an African language or two. We have a couple of rock stars who speak English pretty well and can translate for their peers. And the kids have translation apps on their phones but these work slowly and since they don't write English they don't know how to spell the words they're trying to translate from English into their native languages.

So we are calling this a conversation class. But the conversation is a bit tedious so far. On Friday we discussed in small groups what clothing we would need to get through the winter. So, around we would go, "Do you have a hat at home? Yes, I have *I have*, a hat, *a hat*, at home, *at home*. And so forth 6 times, and then on to *a scarf at home, boots at home, a jacket at home*.

Are we having fun yet? Yes, we are having fun all the time! Because these kids are joyous for the most part, friendly, loving, kind, and grateful. Some of them are shy and some of them are show offs and some of them - well all of them- can be silly. The girls hug each other and hold hands and admire their fingernail treatments and elaborate braided hairstyles. The boys punch each other playfully and are, well, teenage boys. They all help each other with instructions and are endlessly kind and funny.

I ask you, could we say this about any class of all-American highschool students? In my experience in those classes, cliques abound, snark is rampant, sullenness and insolence frequent, and I'm talking about highschool more than fifty years ago!

Imagine being deposited in Maine in the fall from the Congo or Haiti or wherever. And imagine having this spirit of fun and friendship and community given what they must have left behind and what they must have been through. It seems miraculous to me.

So I've fallen in love with these kids. They give me a reason to get up and out of the house in the morning after 18 months of Covid torpor. They give me a reason to get up and out of myself. Their spirit fills me with admiration and amazement.

I was sitting for a quiet moment on Friday after they'd left and I began to shake, which is a sign to me of some emotional resonance or release. And I had a flashback to more than 50 years ago when I spent one disastrous year teaching 8th grade English and history at a mainly Black school in Dorchester Massachusetts.

This was in 1968/69, the year before riots closed several schools in Roxbury and Dorchester, but the unrest was already very apparent. These schools were really ungovernable because of the systemic racism that was built in to the system.

And I couldn't teach my kids. I tried my best. I loved them, too. But I couldn't summon the discipline other teachers used to keep control; that is, the stick. Yes, whipping was still legal in the Boston schools then, legal and frequent.

I couldn't do it. And so I was deemed a failure. I could preach many sermons about what I learned that year. But you like me to be short. So I will just say that as I sat shaking on Friday I realized the enormous difference between that experience and this, what a distance we've all progressed in learning how to teach to and with difference, and what an amazing journey these children and I have traveled to find ourselves in the same place at the same time.

And so I give thanks for them, their courage, their resilience, their hope. I give thanks for the wise and kind spirits at the Telling Room who've taken on this new challenge. I give thanks and praise to our city and our state for being a renowned welcoming destination for those in need of sanctuary and resettlement.

And on a completely different topic, I give thanks for all of you at St. Bart's for giving me, always, such a warm and loving welcome.

All praise and thanks to God, forever and ever. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.