

Let us pray. Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, we are grateful for the love you pour out on the cross, and the love you continue to pour out upon the world. Empower us to be your voice and heart and hands, so that the love we embody may heal and uplift all who are in need.

In the name of the One who brings sacrificial love into all the cracks and crevasses and divides around and within us, amen.

In the last several months I've been on a local task force organizing a day of healing for those who have had lost a loved one through suicide. I am also a survivor of losing two brothers. One day, after a long and detailed meeting on zoom, as things were finally falling into place, I was overwhelmed by the dedication, the kindness, the advocacy, and the desire of all of us who gathered. We were creating a day of fullness for those who sorrow, offering a time of listening, sharing, and resources – and doing so in a creative and loving way.

Yesterday we had the event – complete with peace stones ^{to take home} ~~to eat~~, a local ~~hospice~~ choir offering healing song, and a ⁴ therapy dog ~~visit~~ ^{visit}. In a few short hours the fullness of God was apparent at what some might call a very secular event. It was a ~~day~~ ^{morning} of mercy, a day of grace, a day of hope.

Wednesday of this past week there was an annual day long event which raises funds for food pantries in our region, a tradition dating back 24 years. For 12 hours the local radio station broadcasts at the ingathering point for all monies. In that time, over \$52,000 was raised, with more ^{yet} to be counted.

The fullness of God is present in our world. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise. God in Christ is alive through the work of all who exhibit generosity to the victimized, the poor, the hungry, the rejected, the scorned – to all who are crucified by the powers and principalities of our world.

This day referred to as Christ the King or the Reign of Christ was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pious the 11th -- due to his horror at the bloodshed of a world war fought by warring political leaders. His intention was to lift up the ultimate leader around whom we were to orient our lives. The aim of his papacy was to reestablish the kin-dom of Christ by living in peace. This day was set aside as a challenge to the church to refocus its energies on our true ruler, Jesus Christ --and away from unquestioning fidelity to earthly powers.

On this last day of the church year, we gather to ponder the fullness of Christ, this overwhelming grace which demonstrates to the world a crucified and risen Savior, who comes to make all things new.

Two passages come to mind for this day. From today's Colossians reading, verse 19, come these words:

For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

And from the first chapter of John's Gospel, which can be read on Christmas day, we hear:

From Christ's fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

These two readings bracket the season of Advent...from today's festival to Christmas Day.

God gifts fullness into the world in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. Fullness, plentitude, that which fills up, that which pervades every part of our being. Miraculous, generous, mysterious and overwhelming might be some words to describe the inbreaking of Christ into our lives. But I have a story that might give maybe a little more insight.

So, a good friend of mine is an experienced baker and cook who raised three children, gardens for food pantries, and is full of generosity and advocacy for all. She is also the spouse of a retired minister. One particular time she had a very interesting baking day, and she wrote about it.

Here are her words:

Beware cocky bread bakers.....I started my own sourdough starter this afternoon after church. Mixed it up according to recipe....which SAID place non-reactive crock or glass container on a cookie sheet in case of overflow. Nah!!! I said - I am a bread baker - I know what I am doing. I don't need to follow these directions.

I know what sour dough starter looks like and how it acts. Besides, why would King Arthur Flour sell me this really cool little crock if the sour dough overflows. So, I set it up.

Then we left to go shopping. And, we didn't come home for a couple of hours.

Did you know that sour dough starter crawls across counter surfaces like the blob? Did you know that it finds its way down cabinet doors and in between the side of the stove and the counter top. Did you know that it fights you when you try to clean it up because it is a living organism that does not want to be contained.....well, now you do.

I thought of her story as I ponder the fullness of God. That God enters our lives when and where we least expect, even more deeply than uncontrolled sourdough, breaking open our hearts, delving lovingly into the nuances and the nitty gritty and details of life, offering abundance through forgiveness, mercy, and hope. That is how the love of Christ comes to us, freely, surprisingly, graciously. This is who Christ the King is.

And life may get messy when we recognize the holy in our midst – for we don't control the outcome of our days, neither can we flee from God's holy presence. And just when we think we know what we should do, we learn that we don't always know what's the best thing, without the power and presence of God, who guides with wisdom, patience, and compassion. This is who Christ the King is.

Available. Everywhere present. Modelling servant leadership. Known not for human riches, palaces, or vast lands – but known as the well of living water, the light of the world, the vine who nourishes all, the bread of life, the loving shepherd, the vulnerable child born in a manger, and the One who overcomes the cross and tomb.

This is most apparent in the final conversation on the cross between Jesus and the two criminals from today's Gospel. One rages at him violently, angry that Jesus cannot save himself or himself. In his brokenness he needs someone to blame, and that person is Jesus.

The other criminal recognizes the inhumanity of crucifying one who has done nothing wrong. He recognizes something holy and just in Jesus. *Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.*

Today, you will be with me in paradise, Jesus replies, **to both of them.**

Paradise, a place of blessedness and fullness, where the relationship of love and compassion between God in Christ and all of creation is present, including the angry and the sorrowful. For everyone is beloved in the eyes of God. That is who Christ the king is. *And his kin-dom, as one author says so eloquently, is not of domination, but of servanthood; not of mockery, but kindness; not of cruelty, but mercy; not of fear, but of courage.*

Today we are challenged to remember that Christ's "kingship" is not the way of human kings, nor human wanna- be kings, who brutally and ruthlessly oppress, devastate, or kill the spirits, the bodies, the futures of others.

Christ is the crucified and risen One, suffering and dying so that new life might be born in this world. Christ serves as one who uplifts the brokenhearted, fills the hungry, extends mercy, but upends rulers, the mighty, the proud, the rich, as Mary will again sing for us again in Advent.

For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And from Christ's fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Where do you see this fullness of Christ right now?

Where do you long for this fullness and mercy to come near?

This morning, In this gathering of God's beloved, in the meal of this table before us, in the songs and prayers and laments of our hearts, Christ, Emmanuel, is with us.

Remember the words of Colossians: **Christ has rescued us from the power of darkness.**

Consider the words of Psalm 46, which proclaims twice:

The Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.

And also these words: **God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.**

It is a mystery, how deeply the God of all creation, The God revealed in Christ and revealed to us through the Spirit, offers compassion and love. It is the mystery we ponder again in the weeks to come.

And so we pray:

Come, Lord Jesus, bring your mercy and justice. Send us as messengers of your good news. Bring liberation, wisdom and mercy to those who cry out to you.

For you are the Word made flesh, entering all brokenness with resurrection and transformation and healing.

In the name of the One who brings sacrificial, saving love into all the cracks and crevasses and divides around and within us, to bring the fullness, the abundance of life to all. Amen