

“An Old New Thing” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church May 2, 2010

TEXTS Rev. 21:1-6 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life

John 13:31-35 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.

REVELATION! We don’t read it much --it conjures up strange scary images of fantastic creatures and punishment in the lake of fire, 7 trumpets, 7 seals, 7 bowls, 7 kings 7 everything... dark and convoluted and weird, right? Well not completely! Remember that this Book is apocalyptic literature, that is, poetic, highly symbolic, always looking toward an ultimate destiny. John of Patmos composed it when he himself was imprisoned. Christians were under active persecution; for the Romans were intensifying their enforcement of Emperor worship. John wrote to be encouraging. Although the images seem bizarre to our imagination, they are meant to fortify Christians to stand firm against seemingly Satanic opposition, promising, in the end,. a world of healing and wholeness.

In the only passage in Revelation where God actually speaks, we hear the Holy One say, "See, I am making all things new ... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." God is saying all that was declared earlier in this passage will take place. All will be accomplished. Best yet, John declares, this hope of a future age of peace, ruled by God, now comes with the declaration that salvation is no longer limited to obedient Jews and a few "righteous Gentiles." It now is dependent upon one's name being found in "The Book of Life" In other words, it is open to all. All can drink from the water of life.

And yet, last week, the State of Arizona enacted a law making it a criminal offence not only to be an illegal immigrant in that state, but even to help or to transport an illegal immigrant. Yesterday thousands and thousands across the country marched in protest of this law. But most Arizonans – and many others across the country --see the law as protecting the country from massive waves of illegal immigrants who are using services without paying taxes and who are overwhelming existing communities.

Are you outraged about this law, or are you ambiguous, or neutral, or secretly quietly approving?

In the 1980's this church was among many to participate in the sanctuary movement. They opened their church buildings to services for illegal immigrants and in some cases, assisted those being deported. Several ministers, including the Rev. John Fife of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, were charged and convicted of breaking US immigration laws. But the problem continues.

Here is what the Presbyterian Church (USA) said in its official statement:

“As people of faith and the leaders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we are keenly aware of the devastating effects our broken immigration system has on the lives of individuals, immigrant and non-immigrant families, and our communities. The bigotry, trauma, and fear that will result from the recent new law enacted in Arizona, which criminalizes those who are found "with" undocumented persons and requires law enforcement officers to identify and detain such persons, serves to underscore the necessity of action at the federal level.

In the Scriptures of Christians and Jews, we are commanded, “When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the immigrant as yourself for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33-34). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) therefore supports congressional action in 2010 on comprehensive immigration reform that creates a process for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. to earn their legal status; reduces waiting periods and upholds family unity; protects workers from exploitation; and provides efficient channels of entry for new migrant workers.”

Are you still neutral? Now "day laborers", usually illegal immigrants, paid in cash by contractors, to do the dirtiest and hardest of jobs; landscaping; cleaning; construction work, can no longer be offered jobs. For the illegal immigrant, this work is a blessing. Unable to find work in their home in Central American countries and especially in Mexico, these US dollars are a huge bonanza. Money is sent home to support other family members. In Arizona it is now illegal to offer any undocumented person a ride even to church.

Further, Arizona's new law will put at risk those workers and others – Christian volunteers and clergy among them--who are called to offer the most basic of humanitarian assistance. This is the state through which millions of Mexicans walk from

the border, the state where stations are set up in the desert to offer water and food. As Christians, can we stand by idly while our brothers and sisters die on our borders from exposure and thirst or languish in poorly equipped detention facilities? We should not be required to do so by any law.

There is a great deal of debate these days about immigrants. Are day laborers stealing jobs from Americans or performing vital service in the dirtiest and hardest of jobs? How do you feel about women from Arab countries, and headscarves! Should residents of France be required to show one's head or can they keep their old traditions? And what of the drive to require everyone to speak English? Are they stealing your food or job or health benefit? Are immigrants more trouble than they are worth?

Who gets to decide one's worth anyway?

This idea of radical inclusion is at the foundation of the Christian faith. And it is at the core of God's mission to redeem humanity. And every time we seek to exclude, marginalize or otherwise set aside any of God's children we should be troubled.

As we go about our business being the church, what makes us different? Do we live our values of radical inclusiveness?

God never intended God's boundaries to be less than the whole world. Therefore, none of us have a monopoly on God's love. We may feel like we do when we look down on someone different than we are, or when we snicker at someone's misfortune, or when we say, "Thank you, Lord, that I am not like them," or when we say, "It's too bad they do not believe as we believe." But woe be unto us whenever we reek of such arrogance! For when we try to restrict God's grace to ourselves, we cut ourselves off from that very grace. Why? Pierre Teilhard de Chardin may have said it best, "It is impossible to love Christ without loving others, and it is impossible to love others without moving nearer to Christ."

"A new commandment I give to you: that you should love one another, even as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Here is a true story out of Gulfport after Katrina. At the Red Cross center at the local middle school, a distraught African-American woman asked tearfully for six flashlight batteries. "My kids are afraid of the dark" she explained. "Sorry," came the answer. "Only two batteries to a family. However, if you have relatives living with you, you can have two more for each one." The woman just stood there paralyzed, feeling helpless when Ryan Abel, who is white, piped up. "I'm a relative," he said. "So am I," announced a young Chinese girl nearby. The Red Cross worker handed the woman six batteries with a smile.

As long as the human will supersedes God's will, peace will never occur. As long as nations fight against each other without realizing the devastating effects the conflict has on the people, we will not enjoy the beauty of learning from one another. When human beings assume that some are superior to others or allow a portion of the community to live in poverty or fear, John's vision in revelation will not occur on earth. And Christ's commandment cannot be filled.

Love who? Why everybody. Nothing could be clearer from the Gospels than that. I believe if Jesus were telling the story today it would be the story of the Good Palestinian, if a Jew can love a Palestinian, then there is no limit on love. We are to love not only our immediate neighbors but also the cashier who checks our groceries and the cop who stops us on the expressway as well as the obnoxious people who cross our paths every day.

We are reminded daily of the privileged circumstances in which many of us live. It is crucial to accept these things as gifts and never to take them for granted, remembering that God has placed us into positions in which we can effect change, advocate for others, and pray for their well being. Caring for others is a means of responding to Christ's unconditional love. Even in an imprisoned state on the island of Patmos, John never stopped sharing his vision with the seven churches. God still empowered him to envision a better day and a new heaven and a new earth.

We are responsible for working with those who struggle with issues of inequality, poverty, and injustice, and to associate with organizations committed to justice and equality. When we do this work, we show the love to which Jesus calls us: I give you anew commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

May it be so.