

This is the last in our Worship series entitled: “Outside my Own Little World.” This title came from a song by Matthew West about a man who recognizes that his life has been completely focused on himself. His world has a Population of One. When he reaches out to a homeless widow, his world grows to Population: Two—and the circle widens, as the widow opens his heart to the suffering of others.

We have heard the story of the dishonest steward and Jesus’ call to the practice of neighbor love in economic relationships; the story of the rich man who misses what truly matters when he doesn’t see poor Lazarus outside his gate. We heard about the persistent Widow and Unjust Judge, the arrogant Pharisee and humble tax collector, about persevering for a greater purpose and being a praying congregation.

And when someone like Zacchaeus is ready to be re-formed, we saw that a kind invitation can transform the whole community. Blessed are the saints, blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers for theirs is and will be the kingdom of God.

And today we come to two visions of the future that have the power to inspire and terrify us at the same time, but which, I believe, are part of the whole circle or cycle of human life. God is surely with us, for the readings for this Sunday are uncanny in their timing; these are words we may need to hear, following Election Day.

Both Jesus and the prophet Isaiah describe endings and new beginnings, the limits and impermanence of our human world in contrast with the never-ending presence and promise of God’s realm. As we come near the end of the church year next Sunday, the lectionary texts often turn toward apocalyptic predictions of destruction before there is a new world, God’s kingdom fully realized. Apocalyptic is talk about the end of the world as we know it.

“Jesus, look at these massive stones and this glorious temple!” his disciples exclaim. There was certainly nothing like this in their rural home towns! But Jesus isn’t impressed. “Yes, I see these stones. And the days will come when all of them will be thrown down.” And it’s true. This great temple is gone; all that is left is a jumble of stones that now make up the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem (1).

After the presidential election, however, it is not the destruction of buildings that some or many of you may fear, but rather the overturning of government policies that you strongly support and view as progress for our nation. Most of us fear that the bitter wrangling and divisiveness will continue, if not increase, in the days and months to come.

To all of us, Jesus says: “Do not be terrified. This will give you an opportunity to testify. I will give you words and wisdom. By your endurance, you will gain your souls.”

Now may seem like the time to avoid talking about politics, especially with those who disagree with you. We’re all tired! But this is exactly the time for such conversations. Think of one

person who doesn't agree with your political views. Then think of another person and another. Go and ask them, one at a time: How you feeling now that the election is over? What are your hopes and dreams; what are you frustrated, angry or worried about? Listen. Express your own hopes and concerns. If you're feeling brave, point out when either of you do any name calling, or "us vs them" talk!

One person at a time, we can intentionally keep communication lines open, practice and even model constructive ways in which to disagree. A very daunting call and task that will require patience and endurance, but as disciples of Christ, we persevere for a greater purpose, don't we? Our call doesn't change as politics change. As we persist in working for reconciliation and justice, we also persist in being merciful, humble, and pure in heart. The Spirit will guide us with words and wisdom.

This morning, I don't hear Jesus today describing signs of the end time, but rather the signs of the terrible brokenness of our world: famines, nation rising against nation, persecution, the deterioration of institutions, acts of terrorism, the destruction of our earth and its resources. I also hear Jesus reminding us that there are things we must release or bring to an end, starting with destructive attitudes and emotions, cruel words and violent actions, so that new possibilities for understanding and collaboration may emerge.

Jesus says: "Testify to the truth of God's presence and transformative power of the Spirit. In all that you say and do, embody your faith and hope in the realm of God, the vision that our still-speaking God promises. And what a glorious vision it is, as proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah!

"I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating. No more shall the cry of distress be heard. The people will build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. You shall not labor in vain; you shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and your descendants as well."

God was speaking to the people returning from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem, when they struggled with economic injustice and political turmoil. And a caring, responsive God is still speaking to us, still working through all creation to bring transformation, not in some apocalyptic sense but in a concrete, earthly experience of endings and beginnings, dramatic and at times traumatic changes out of which God can be trusted to bring all that is good and right. How we all long for things to be made right! (2)

As a congregational UCC church, we have beliefs and opinions that differ on religious, political and economic issues. But I think that all of us agree that our call is to share the good news of God's forgiving love at work within us and through us. God is always creating and making things new. We seek to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we continue to wrestle with putting this into practice.

I would like to read verses from a poem entitled “Kindness,” by Naomi Shihab Nye, for her words strike me as expressing not only the reality of our broken world and the vision of God’s kin-dom here on earth, but also our call as Christians.

“Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.” (3)

The tender gravity of kindness, the circle of human life that encompasses the reality and the vision. I would say that kindness goes with us everywhere like a shadow AND a friend. The word compassion after all, means “with suffering” or “suffering with.” And the word kindness

begins with the word KIN. Suffering with kin, neighbor love, kindness, the realm of God here on earth.

Yes indeed, Jesus, we have a big opportunity—and an ongoing call--- in the coming days and years to testify to the power of love and justice. Now is the time to move boldly beyond our own little worlds, inspiring others to do the same.

Children of God, what do you dream about? Do you know what God dreams about?

Children of God, do you know how to make God's dream come true?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, will you help God's dream come true? (4)

And let the people say: **Yes, we will, God!** Amen.

### SOURCES

1. Willimon, William. *Pulpit Resource, Vol. 32 No. 4.* (Year C, November 2004), p. 30.
2. UCC Stewardship Resources, 2016, "Go and Do The Same." Worship Materials, November 13, p. 27
3. Naomi Shibah Nye, "Kindness," from *Risking Everything*, Ed. Roger Housden (New York, Harmony Books, 2003), pp. 76-77.
4. Tutu, Archbishop Desmond. "God's Dream." (Candlewick, 2008). Children's book.