

August 4, 2024  
Lectionary 18, Year B  
The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Ephesians 4:1-16  
John 6:24-35  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Jesus is King

Our new Bishop of the New England Synod, Nathan Piphio, will be installed into the office of Bishop on September 7<sup>th</sup>, but he actually began his work as Bishop on August 1<sup>st</sup>. And the very next day he had to send the following letter to the Synod:

My first day as Bishop of the New England Synod greeted me with the disturbing news that Christ Lutheran Church in Natick, Massachusetts was one of five congregations in the Natick area who were victims of vandalism on the weekend of July 27-28, 2024 due to their explicit welcome of LGBTQIA+ persons. Congregations of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts and the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ were also vandalized.

I have been in direct contact with Pastor Christophor Gilbert to offer my support to him and the congregation. I'm glad to hear the congregation has been well loved and supported by neighbors in Natick.

Given the broad nature of the attack, I have joined Bishop Alan Gates and Assistant Bishop Carol Gallagher of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts and the Rev. Elizabeth Garrigan-Byerly, Executive Minister for Area Conference Ministry & Acting Conference Minister, Southern New England UCC in releasing a public statement declaring our unequivocal love, welcome, and support for all LGBTQIA+ persons, rejecting violence, and

calling for conversation in the name of Christ that builds a loving and just world. (excerpt from letter from Bishop Nathan Piphio, August 2, 2024)

The letter was not the first notice that I'd received about the acts of vandalism perpetrated against churches in our area. Last Sunday, between the first and second services here at Emmanuel I received the following email from one of my friends and colleagues here in Norwood, Pastor Michele Allan:

I wanted to let you know that last night our church was targeted because of our "Open and Affirming" Commitment. I arrived to find that overnight someone had rearranged our rainbow chairs into the shape of a cross, removed our welcoming flags, and covered over our banner with a flag that said "Jesus is King." They also left a number of copies of letters condemning our church and me as their shepherd for leading the church astray because of our stance about welcome to LGBTQ+ community. From our Ring Doorbell, it looks as though this was done by 2 individuals during the night.

I will be reporting this to the police this afternoon, but wanted to let you know.

Thanks for your prayers for our community as we respond to this in appropriate ways. (excerpt from email from Pastor Michele Bagby Allan, Pastor of First Congregational Church, Norwood, July 28, 2024)

When I shared that this had happened with the Prayer Group on Wednesday, I hesitated to call these acts vandalism, because, as far as I knew at that time, none of the damage that had been done was permanent. One of the group members assured me that these acts did constitute vandalism and others in the group let me know that similar things had been done to two churches in Natick, including Christ Lutheran, one of our sister congregations in our Synod and Conference. It was two

days after Prayer Group that Bishop Piphó's letter to the synod came out about the attacks at Christ in Natick and the other churches.

Here's the thing that has been weighing on me over the past week and that I know that others are struggling with too. These things were done by people wielding the Bible and claiming to have Jesus' authority in their vandalism of churches. In fact, one of the banners that they hung up to block the welcoming banners of the churches they were vandalizing proclaimed, "Jesus is King", as though the churches that they had targeted didn't know that.

I've always questioned whether or not it is in good taste to quote my own sermons, but today I was compelled to, because probably around the same time that other congregations were seeing the vandalism done to their property, seeing "Jesus is King" banners hung up over their banners of welcome, and reading hate filled letters addressed to them and to their pastors, I spoke these words in my sermon:

The story of Jesus walking on the water tells us that Jesus isn't going to behave.

He is more than a prophet. And he isn't going to let a mob make him their king on their terms and not on his. He is God, and his power is for creation and for life and he will overcome any obstacle to bring that life into the world. (Lectionary 17, Year B Sermon, July 28, 2024, Amanda L. Warner)

Jesus is king. That is beyond a doubt, it is a tenet of our faith, the kingship, the Lordship of Jesus. But to those who would express the kingship of Jesus by vandalizing other churches who welcome those they would reject, exclude, condemn, and excommunicate, I would say, "You keep using that phrase. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Today many of us will be gathering for Worship in the Park and for a multi-church picnic, with us, and the people of Grace Episcopal Church and Remnant

Community Church. Needless to say, I've been watching the weather with great trepidation all week, but it looks like we're going to be okay.

You are the only group that's going to hear my sermon today, because Pastor Veronica, from Remnant is going to be preaching at Worship in the Park. The title of her sermon is, *Being United is a Blessing!* A perfect title for a sermon when three churches are getting together to sing, to praise, to worship, to pray, to receive communion, and to share fellowship with each other.

Pastor Veronica is preaching from a text from Philippians at Worship in the Park today, but we find a message of unity in our second reading for today too. In the reading from Ephesians, we hear Paul writing from prison begging the people of the church in Ephesus to,

...lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

I'm guessing that those who vandalized churches in the name of Christ missed this passage from Ephesians about humility and gentleness, and "with patience bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:2-3)

But now, of course I'm doing what the vandals did, throwing scripture at people with whose behavior I disagree, thinking I have the moral high ground and using words of scripture to back me up. Nobody ever said that being a Christian was going to be easy, but here's something I know. If you use scripture as a weapon

against others instead of as a guide and corrective to yourself, you're using it wrongly.

Here's something else I know. Unity is hard, especially when it calls us to claim as companions in Christ, those with whom we deeply disagree and whose behavior harms vulnerable people. I also know that gathering around the Lord's table and even our earthly table, even at a picnic, is a very Jesus-y way to build relationships and to take steps to the unity that Jesus proclaims when he prays that his church may be one.

Last week, I told you that we were going to spend the next five weeks in the chapter 6 of the gospel of John and so far, other than quoting my own sermon from last week, I haven't mentioned chapter 6 of the gospel of John at all. So, here it is.

After Jesus and his disciples made it across the Sea of Galilee, them in a boat and him walking on water, and landed at Capernaum, many of those who had been in the crowd who Jesus had fed with five loaves and two fish, followed him and his disciples across the sea. This was what Jesus had been trying to avoid when he went up into the mountain to escape the crowd and to pray, but they followed him anyway.

And when Jesus saw them, a discussion began that lasted for a long time, for 33 verses of chapter 6 of John's gospel. And, (are you ready for a spoiler) at the end of that 33-verse discussion/discourse, we learn in verse 66 of chapter 6, that many of Jesus' disciples stopped following him. It says that they, "turned back and no longer went about with him." (John 6:66) Once they found out who Jesus really was and what he was really there to do, when they realized that he no longer served the agenda that they were prioritizing, they no longer wanted to be with him, no longer wanted to be his followers.

It seems, from our gospel reading for today, John 6:24-35, 9 verses of the 33-verse discourse that makes up the bulk of chapter 6 of John, that Jesus knew

that this would happen. After the crowd finds Jesus, he says, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves....” (John 6:26)

Jesus seems to know that people turn to him to address their own agendas, rather than to learn from him and to receive what he has to give.

So here is my prayer for us, for all of us in this church and in the whole church. That when we come to Jesus, who is indeed our king, we come not with a worldly agenda, not with preconceived notions about what we want from him, but with open hearts, open minds, open hands, to receive the life that he has to give. The life that will reshape us as his people. The life that will draw us closer to God. The life that will teach us to love, as God so loved the world. The life that will fill us up and make us overflow with joy and with compassion. The life of Jesus who said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35) Amen.