

November 24, 2024

Reign of Christ Sunday

“Deepening Relationships”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Jeremiah 36 and 31

This covenant was first given to the people in Judah and those in the Jewish faith who are guided by the Hebrew scriptures. It remains strong for all of them. For us, who claim Christ Jesus, we claim these promises of God, too. We see this new covenant through the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. For us, the gift of Jesus helps us experience God’s ever-deepening relationship with us.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday, also called Christ the King. This Sunday was originally instituted by Pope Pious XI in 1925. The celebration was meant to counter the forces in the world that he saw leading to destruction: secularism, communism, fascism, totalitarian rule. The day was meant to remind Christians who truly ruled, who reigned supreme; not any earthly leader, but only Jesus Christ. The church hears in the words of Jeremiah, the claim of God incarnate in Christ: “I shall be your God and you shall be my people.” God makes an exclusive claim on our lives. We are to serve Christ alone, the one who reigns. Yet that promise comes through an inclusive covenant. Through a promise that was for two rival nations, Israel and Judah, that so long ago made up God’s people. Through a covenant that does not depend on any particular human’s ability to be faithful, but that only depends on God’s decision to love.

Christ reigns—in the world, and in our hearts. When we want to feel and deepen that relationship even more, we can choose to dwell with God one on one to develop that rapport, intimacy, and trust. We can ask God questions and look directly on God’s goodness in the world. When we do, we might find that we fall more deeply in love. But whether we do or whether we don’t, we can trust that God has come in Christ, that the new covenant holds true for all God’s people. God’s guidance is already within us. God’s love is already engraved on our hearts. God is already at work deepening the loving relationship God has with us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

In the late 90’s, a psychologist named Arthur Aron ran a scientific experiment to see if he could make pairs of strangers fall in love. He and his co-authors invited these strangers into their laboratory. But for this experiment, there were no heart monitors, no medicines, no screens. There was just a list of 36 deep, open-ended questions for the two people to ask and answer. The questions came in three sets from fun, surface-level stuff like “would you like to be famous? If so, in what way?” to deeper things, like “how was your relationship with your mother?” and “when did you last cry in front of another person?” After all the questions, the two people sat face to face and stared into each other’s eyes for four full minutes. To everyone’s amazement, six months later, two of the participants were walking down the aisle!

In 2015, Mandy Lee Catron wrote in the *New York Times* “Modern Love” column about her own testing of this experiment.¹ Using the same 36 questions, she and an acquaintance took turns answering them while seated at a bar. Then they undertook the four minutes of gazing. The experiment created the kind of trust, rapport, and emotional intimacy in the span of one evening, which usually takes weeks, months—maybe even longer—to cultivate. The result? These two, also, fell in love. After Catron’s column was published, lots of other couples tried the experiment, too. The Times was flooded with messages of people who had used the strategy and fallen in love—or just as often—deepened their partnership or strengthened a friendship.

Most people long for deeper, more meaningful relationships—by which I mean friendships, family relationships, as well as dating, marriage, or partnered relationships. We long for cherished conversations, trusted confidences, and the privilege and responsibility of knowing another person’s heart. But ask any middle-aged adult how hard it is to make friends, or any person suffering through dating apps, and we can be confident that deepening our relationships is no easy task. How do you move from saying

1 Mandy Lee Catron, “To Fall in love with anyone, do this,” January 9, 2015, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/style/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html?unlocked_article_code=1.a04.bN_PuDIIsIBWWaO7l&smid=url-share

2 Qtd. in Olga Khazan, “Stop Firing Your Friends,” *The Atlantic*, June 28, 2023.

hi to other parents at school pick-up to actually talking to them about the challenges your family faces? How do you go from drinks with a friend to pondering an engagement? Surely this stretches to include our spiritual relationships too: How do you move from going to church on Sunday to feeling like God is really present with you?

In chapter 31, Jeremiah proclaimed the good news of a new, deepening relationship between God and the people. The prophet tells of a God who sits down with God's people and gazes upon them. He talks about a God who will not just take people by the hand to lead them. But whose instructions are imprinted on the people's very hearts. This is a God whose love permeates their bones. The kind of covenant relationship Jeremiah proclaimed did not need the equal participation of both parties - God and the people - the way the lab experiment requires both people to do. This covenant is first and primarily God's choice to reach out to people, to claim and love us, to deepen our belovedness. Just like we know the challenge and vulnerability of deepening and building our human relationships, God took a great risk to make these promises of love.

God's making of this new covenant was not a foregone conclusion. In fact, it is so surprising in the middle of Jeremiah's prophecy that this little section—chapter 31—goes by a special name: the Book of Consolation. This chapter and the covenant it describes builds on hope, rather than the condemnation and concern that characterizes most of the book.

See, Jeremiah was a prophet speaking to the kings in Judah, the southern kingdom of God's people. As a prophet, Jeremiah was not foretelling the future, he was just telling the truth about what he saw. He described how God's people were going astray in their relationship with God. In this book, we have fast-forwarded a few hundred years from the time of Isaiah, which we read last week. Here, the threat to the nation was no longer from Assyria, but from another ancient power, Babylon. Yet the political and spiritual issues were pretty much the same. The people were not worshiping God properly. The kings were set on rebelling against the Babylonian threat, which only antagonized Babylon more. And which God did not want them to do anyway. Jeremiah was a lone voice urging the kings not to rebel against their neighbors. His words were unwelcome and they put him in danger.

That's the narrative that we read from chapter 36 today. It's a compelling story about Jeremiah asking that his prophecy be written down and read aloud. First, the people heard his urging to turn from their evil ways and turn back toward God. After that, the written scroll of prophecy was then brought before King Jehoiakim. A man named Jehudi read it aloud to the

king. And then in dramatic fashion, after every few columns, he used a penknife to rip off another strip and then threw it into the blazing fire, sending Jeremiah's message from God up in smoke. It's a damning picture of the King's attitude toward God's prophecy. And also a clear reminder that this nation—people and king included—were ignoring God's call to repentance and God's invitation to faithful relationship.

When relationships feel broken, as that one surely was, we sometimes choose to exit them. These kind of break-ups seem to be happening more and more today, not just in romantic relationships but especially just with friends. As author Sheila Liming writes in her book *Hanging Out*, "we make a habit of turning away from all the things and people and encounters that bother, confuse, or tax us. We abandon them, comforting ourselves with excuses about how they're not worth our time anyway."² There are certainly occasions when exiting a relationship is a healthy and necessary decision. But other times, it's the opposite that's needed; when digging in, working through things, and deepening our bonds would actually be what's life-giving.

In our relationship with God, we get to make choices like this, too. When things feel ho-hum or even static in our spiritual life, as they sometimes do, we can choose to quit our faith, or just ignore God's call on our lives. Or instead, we can choose a path toward strengthening the relationship. We can choose to be vulnerable. To gaze at God for longer than feels comfortable. We can go deeper—ask questions of God—36 or maybe even more, try new approaches, spend more time with God to figure it out, not less. We can try silence and listening instead of so much prayerful talking. None of those strategies is a sure thing to feel closer to God, of course. But most of all of them are more satisfying than giving up on God.

The new covenant Jeremiah proclaimed is a word of comfort to us, just as much as it was when he spoke it. Because it's a reminder that when it comes to our relationship with God, a lot of it doesn't depend on us anyway. It depends on God. And God has already decided what to do: which is to go deeper with us, to break open our hearts and plant the Spirit there, to choose us, over and over again. No matter how many times we ignore God's words. No matter how often we, in some symbolic way, let God's words go up in smoke. God promises to claim us from the least to the greatest. God promises not to hold grudges—"I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." We don't need to feel guilt or shame about our fumbling around for God, "for they shall all know me," God said. This covenant is a picture of grace—God reaching out to deepen the love between us, whether we deserve it or not.