

Beloved Community Summit for the Episcopal Church in Colorado
Evensong Sermon
Wednesday, June 11, 2025
The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers

Ride on King Jesus
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In just a few days, Americans will experience two very different celebrations of two very different kingdoms.

June 14 is President Donald Trump's 79th birthday, and it will be marked with a full-scale military parade in DC, also honoring the 250th birthday of the Army. It's the first full-scale parade of its kind in decades, and Army estimates say it could cost \$45 million if you count the expected \$16 million in damage to the streets of the nation's capitol.

A few hours earlier, in Chicago, newly elected Roman Catholic Pope Leo IV will virtually address a crowd of 20,000 at Rate Field, home of Chicago White Sox. Though he won't be present in the flesh, it will be the first appearance by an American pope to American audience.

Lots of folk were surprised when the Vatican announced the celebration in May. Is the Pope really counter-programming a Presidential Parade? I mean, when he was a cardinal, he reposted content disagreeing with Trump's policies. When VP J.D. Vance tried to say Catholic doctrine endorses caring for one's own before helping others, then-cardinal Prevost posted, "J.D. Vance is wrong."

As soon as he became the pontiff, right wing pundits were declaring him a "woke Pope." Rather than hush, he has since consistently proclaimed the gospel imperative to protect migrants and respect the dignity of all people and warned about the danger of authoritarianism. And now he's hosting a major service in a stadium on American soil hours before a historic, unprecedented military parade on the president's birthday.

Is the papal mass in Chicago intentional counterprogramming? Is the Pope political? I for one certainly hope so. There's nothing more appropriate for Jesus's followers to do.

The triumphant Palm Sunday procession our churches enact every year? The original was a protest. *Our* king intentionally rode in on a donkey rather than an imperial steed. That spectacle was intentionally staged to send a message to the emperor about who has the real power.

Our king was executed for refusing to place the authority of a corrupt emperor and religious authorities over the authority and truth of God. That's as Christian as you can get.

Whoever said politics and religion don't mix, never met Jesus or read the gospels. And if we've learned anything from the tragic history of indigenous genocide, chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation and Nazism, it's the danger of Christians separating Jesus and his word from things deemed "political." We separate them at our peril.

So I don't know if Pope Leo means to have a virtual showdown with Trump. But I'm grateful a religious leader will speak up on that day. I pray courage and wisdom for him. And as he prepares, I hope someone passes him Matthew 10.¹ We could all use this word from Jesus right now ...

By this 10th chapter of Matthew, Jesus has run himself ragged, traveling to as many villages and towns as he could reach. So he turns to his disciples and tells them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. So I'm sending you out. I need you to do two things, the heart of my ministry, and I've given you the power to accomplish them: 1) proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near and 2) heal people and cast out demons."

He instructs them around how to engage this ministry in the most humble, effective and well Christlike way possible. And he closes with this guidance: "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. You'll be dragged before the religious authorities, governors and kings. Don't worry. I'll give you the words. I'll give you the power. Now go."

This is the Christian call, and it rests on every follower of Jesus, from Popes to diocesan Bishops to Sunday school children and all of us in between. There is nothing apolitical about this call. It is subversive. It is confrontational. It is trouble.

What's so subversive about what Jesus asks in Matthew 10? First, he tells the disciples to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven. Understand: the kingdoms of this world

¹ **Matthew 10:1-20:** *Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ... These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions:*

"Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff, for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

meant little to Jesus. He was no good at appeasing earthly leaders. He didn't willfully insult them (ok, except for that time he called Herod a fox in Luke 13. Is it really an insult if it's true?). But here is the thing: Jesus was crystal clear that the kingdom of heaven encompasses and superseded every power on this earth.

And while the kingdom to which he pointed was a spiritual and heavenly reality, the moment he became flesh among us, the kingdom came to life right here on earth. From his first sermon to his last, Jesus preached this reality: "Repent for the kingdom is near!" "If you see me, you see the Father." "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

And how is God's will enacted in heaven? What happens when the kingdom draws near? When heaven touches the earth, when God's will is enacted in our midst, it looks like beloved community.

Now I know we hear this phrase constantly. It's the title and inspiration for this very gathering. What does it mean? First of all, beloved community is all about love. What is love? The deep, heartfelt, active willingness to give away some part of myself for the sake of another, as Jesus sacrificed for us.

So beloved community is love incarnate. It is also a *community*. We are knit one to another. No part can say, I have no need of you. My flourishing is completely tied up with yours.

What else? Beloved community is marked by contagious faith and joy. You know it from Acts 2. That community loved one another! They spent days and nights praying and singing together, sharing and tending as any had need. Their neighbors witnessed all that joy and power. Everybody wanted some of this.

Beloved community is a community of love marked by justice, equity and peace. No one has too much, no one has too little. No one lords over anyone else. There is no longer the free over the enslaved, Greeks over Jew, male over female – the differences remain, but all the hierarchies are torn down. And in beloved community, no one steps on anyone else. We unite and struggle against anything that diminishes the children of God, understanding that we're ALL children of God.

Disciples of Jesus commit our hearts and bodies to the dream of beloved community. And while it is inspired by heaven, we're not waiting til we die to see it. Beloved community is the kingdom of heaven on earth. We might not see it fulfilled in our lifetime, but we're living for it, praying for it. God's kingdom is now.

The earthly powers don't like hearing that. Say it anyway. Be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove, but do not be silent. Use your words. It will get you into trouble. You'll be labeled political. Say it anyway.

Proclaiming the kingdom of heaven is now – that's one part of the mission Jesus laid upon his disciples. He also wanted them to back it up with action. It's a Jesus Movement. Get moving.

Specifically, Jesus says, “Cure the sick.” Ease people’s pain and its causes. Tend the wounds. Intervene so the sickness ends.

Jesus says, “Raise the dead.” Restore life and strength to those who thought their life was over, or might have been given up for dead. Help people to move through the valley of the shadow of death to new life.

Jesus says, “Cleanse the lepers.” Go to the outcasts, the unclean, even if it means people say you’re now unclean. Cleanse the stain, remove the stigma, and reincorporate them into community.

And Jesus says, “Cast out demons.” Let’s be clear: we all have demons. A demon is any power you feel you cannot resist, any destructive behaviors or structures you can’t escape. Demons torment us, curse us, possess us, cause us to harm ourselves and others. Jesus says cast them out and make my people free.

Demons possess so much of America right now. Demons of racism, nationalism, xenophobia. Demons of greed, fear and hatred. These demons infect people’s minds and souls. They infect our institutions and systems. They diminish the humanity of anyone they possess.

Jesus longs to see us free from these demons. And he has given us power to dismantle and cast them out. Out of our churches, out of our schools, out of our government, out of our hearts.

This ministry will take wisdom and it will take gentleness. It will take putting our bodies on the line, like sheep in the midst of wolves. It will take sacrificial love and nonviolent resistance. It will take filling stadiums and proclaiming justice and love on a day designed to instill fear and repression. It will send you into realms deemed “political.” Go there anyway.

Heal the world’s deep brokenness and preach the kingdom of heaven. And if anybody asks what you’re doing, making trouble and messing in politics, just tell them Jesus sent you.

Amen.

