**“In Christ”** Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Colossians 1:15-28 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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One of the best rock concerts I ever attended was about twenty years ago in Oklahoma City. I went with my now late friend Christa Woods to see the band Green Day. We had horrible seats, high up in the arena, almost by the roof. But that didn’t spoil the great performance the band put on.

 At the time they were touring after the release of their smash hit album *American Idiot.* This entire album was a direct challenge to American imperial ambitions in the early Aughts, as we went to war in Iraq and thought we were going to remake the Middle East.

Even the visuals of the band’s performance challenged those imperial ambitions, using the red and black most often associated with fascist regimes in ironic and subversive ways. Maybe those images were more prescient than any of us then realized.

I had loved the album since it was released and listened to it often, so was thrilled to see the band in concert, and they delivered a great performance.

One of the strengths of the album is the way it challenges the evangelical religious attitudes that undergirded much of the Bush administration’s worldview. One of those songsis entitled "Jesus of Suburbia." The song begins:

I'm the son of rage and love
The Jesus of suburbia
From the bible of none of the above
On a steady diet of soda pop and Ritalin
No one ever died for my sins in hell
As far as I can tell

Get my television fix sitting on my crucifix
The living room or my private womb
While the moms and brads are away
To fall in love and fall in debt
To alcohol and cigarettes and Mary Jane
To keep me insane and doing someone else's cocaine

The chorus of the first part of the song then goes:

And there's nothing wrong with me
This is how I'm supposed to be
In a land of make believe
That don't believe in me

Despite this claim that there is nothing wrong, the character in the song clearly feels that there is, in fact, much that is wrong with their empty and vacuous life centered on the commercialism that was supposed to be central to our 9/11 response.

The second movement of the song says,

City of the dead
At the end of another lost highway
Signs misleading to nowhere
City of the damned
Lost children with dirty faces today
No one really seems to care

 In this city of the dead, you read "the holy scriptures of a shopping mall" and the children are

Born and raised by hypocrites
Hearts recycled but never saved
From the cradle to the grave
We are the kids of war and peace
From Anaheim to the Middle East
We are the stories and disciples
Of the Jesus of suburbia
Land of make believe
And it don't believe in me
Land of make believe
And I don't believe
And I don't care!

So, the character in the lyrics runs away to find what he believes, leaving behind "This hurricane of . . . lies." He declares that he has lost his faith, because "the Jesus of Suburbia is a lie."

The young people of that era are now middle-aged parents. But the sense of young adults struggling with meaning, purpose, and belonging and feeling let down by the institutions of our society and culture has only increased. These lyrics were written before the rise of social media and smart phones, the economic collapse of the Great Recession, and of course the rise of Donald Trump and the Covid-19 pandemic. Today we read so many studies about adolescent mental illness, the epidemic of loneliness, deaths of despair. The situation that Green Day was diagnosing in their rock songs has only gotten worse in the ensuing two decades.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has written that the best answer to the question "Who am I?" is not your name or your genealogy. Rather, the best answer is "what is of crucial importance" to you. He continues:

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.

Green Day's song revealed a generation who had lost this place to stand. The worldview they were raised with, including its version of Christian faith, had failed to provide meaning in the face of doubt and fear. It had failed to provide guidance during times of despair. It had robbed them of the ability to experience joy and beauty. It was as vacuous as soda pop--fleeting and inane.

And we hear similar dire warnings from today’s youth and young adults. Cynicism, skepticism, even nihilism, are on the rise.

Charles Taylor writes that when we lose the commitment that identifies us, we are at sea. We don't know the answers to our questions. We don't know what is significant. We are in crisis.

To develop as human beings, to become our best selves, we must commit to something. We must decide what is of crucial importance for us.

And this is one reason I believe that churches like ours are crucial witnesses in our troubled times. We stand for values that matter and are needed right now. We have traditions and practices that can help people nurture a sense of belonging, making meaning, find hope, experience beauty and joy.

The late, great Walter Brueggemann, whose funeral was yesterday, wrote that “the key pathology of our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of the imagination so that we are too numbed, satiated and co-opted to do serious imaginative work.” Therefore, a central responsibility of the Christian church is to empower the imagination. To imagine a richer, fuller, better world.

And to help with that, we encounter a passage like this one in the letter to the Colossians. And, in particular, these opening verses, which seem to be an ancient Christian hymn that predates the writing of this letter. A hymn that the author is drawing upon to stir the emotions and the imaginations of the congregation. A song lyric that the scholars Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat call “nothing less than treasonous.”

How so? They write, “In the space of a short, well-crafted, three-stanza poem, Paul subverts every major claim of the empire, turning them on their heads, and proclaims Christ to be the Creator, Redeemer, and Lord of all of creation, including the empire.”

In other words, this song lyric reveals the true nature of reality—that it is in Christ. And by doing so invites our imaginations to soar beyond the limitations imposed by our current moment and its politics and culture. In particular, to rise above the numbness and meaninglessness and find ourselves in Christ.

Now, I am ordained in the United Church of Christ. And there is an old joke that UCC really stands for "Unitarians Considering Christ." There is truth to that joke, or it wouldn't be funny.

It is true that many modern, liberal Christians, particularly those in the mainline denominations, do not believe all the traditional doctrines and orthodox theologies about Jesus. We have many different visions of who Jesus was and what authority his life holds for us today. And that diversity is an essential part of who we are, as we believe that each individual is responsible for their own spiritual journey, free of outside control. It is this openness to diversity which has helped us to learn new things from those people who were once excluded and oppressed.

It is also true that we are deeply respectful of those who sink their roots in other ground--our siblings of other faiths or those of no religious faith who strive for goodness, peace, and love. We do not presume a monopoly on truth. We do not believe that our perspective is the only perspective. Even the Christ may appear to us in different guises. The Ultimate Mystery of this life is far bigger than we can ever hope to understand.

All of that is true. But it is false to think that Jesus is not center of our faith, for Jesus is the ground in which our roots grow and the vision that stirs our imaginations and excites our hopes.

Ours is a progressive faith precisely because we are followers of Jesus. For it was Jesus who modeled a life of justice and peace. Jesus who included the outcast. Jesus who loved unconditionally. Jesus who showed compassion. Jesus who confronted the powers of evil. Jesus who was an agent of reconciliation.

The Jesus we proclaim is not the "Jesus of surburbia”—vacuous, fleeting, and inane. But a rich and fertile ground in which to plant our roots and draw living water that will re-create us. A place to stand--something to believe in, to hope for, and work towards, a place to know ourselves. And a vision to excite our imaginations and inspire us to dream bold new dreams.

In their commentary on Colossians, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat present the letter as precisely the kind of text that can speak to the predicament of young people in the 21st century. Here is a vision of reality that can provide a sense of meaning and belonging, helping us to form our identity and inspiring our lives.

As part of their book, they offer 21st century versions of the Colossians text, engaging in a version of the traditional Jewish practice of targum, in which one paraphrases and interprets anew the ancient text. So, let me read their 21st century targum for this song lyric from Colossians and let it work on your imagination:

*In an image-saturated world,
 a world of ubiquitous corporate logos
 permeating your consciousness*

*A world of dehydrated and captive imaginations
 in which we are too numbed, satiated, and co-opted
 to be able to dream of life otherwise
a world in which the empire of global economic affluence
 has achieved the monopoly of our imaginations
 in this world
Christ is the image of the invisible God
 in this world
 driven by images with a vengeance
Christ is the image par excellence
 the image above all other images
 the image that is not a façade
 the image that is not trying to sell you anything
 the image that refuses to co-opt you
Christ is the image of the invisible God
 the image of God
 a flesh-and-blood
 here-and-now
 in time and history
 with joys and sorrows
 image of who God is
 the image of God
 a flesh-and-blood
 here-and-now
 in time and history
 with joys and sorrows
 image of who we are called to be
 image-bearers of God
He is the source of a liberated imagination
 a subversion of the empire
because it all starts with him
and it all ends with him
 everything
 all things
 whatever you can imagine
 visible and invisible
 mountains and atoms
 outer space, urban space and cyberspace
 whether it be the Pentagon, Disneyland, Microsoft or AT&T
 whether it be the institutionalized power structures
 of the state, the academy or the market
 all things have been created in him and through him
he is their source, their purpose, their goal
 even in their rebellion
 even in their idolatry
 he is the sovereign one
 their power and authority is derived at best
 parasitic at worst
In the face of the empire
 in the face of presumptuous claims to sovereignty
 in the face of the imperial and idolatrous forces in our lives
 Christ is before all things
 not the pimped dreams of the global market
 not the idolatrous forces of nationalism
 not the insatiable desires of a consumerist culture

In the face of a disconnected world
 where homes is a domain in cyberspace
 where neighborhood is a chat room
 where public space is a shopping mall
 where information technology promises
 a tuned-in, reconnected world
 all things hold together in Christ
 the creation is a deeply personal cosmos
 all cohering and interconnected in Jesus

And this sovereignty takes on cultural flesh
And this coherence of all things is socially embodied
 in the church
 against all odds
 against most of the evidence
In a “show me” culture where words alone don’t cut it
 the church is
 the flesh-and-blood
 here-and-now
 in time and history
 with joys and sorrows
 embodiment of Christ
 as a body politic
 around a common meal
 in alternative economic practices
 in radical service to the most vulnerable
 in refusal of the empire
 in love of this creation

 the church reimagines the world
 in the image of the invisible God

In the face of a disappointed world of betrayal
 a world in which all fixed points have proven illusory
 a world in which we are anchorless and adrift
 Christ is the foundation
 the origin
 the way
 and the life
In the face of a culture of death
 a world of killing fields
 a world of the walking dead
 Christ is at the head of the resurrection parade
 transforming our tears of betrayal into tears of joy
 giving us dancing shoes for the resurrection party
And this glittering joker
 who has danced in the dragon’s jaws of death
 now dances with a dance that is full
 of nothing less than the fullness of God
 this is the dance of the new creation
 this is the dance of life out of death
 and in this dance all that was broken
 all that was estranged
 all that was alienated
 all that was dislocated and disconnected
 what once was hurt
 what once was friction
 is reconciled
 comes home
 is healed
 and is made whole
 because Grace makes beauty out of ugly thing
 everything
 all things
 whatever you can imagine
 visible and invisible
 mountains and atoms
 outer space, urban space and cyberspace
 every inch of creation
 every dimension of our lives
 all things are reconciled in him

And it all happens on a cross
 it all happens at a state execution
 where the governor did not commute the sentence
 it all happens at the hands of the empire
 that has captured our imagination
 it all happens through blood
 not through a power grab by the sovereign one
 it all happens in embraced pain
 for the sake of others
 it all happens on a cross
 arms outstretched in embrace
 and this is the image of the invisible God
 this is the body of Christ*

May we be in Christ—bold, compassionate witnesses, co-creating a just and sustainable world, making Christ real flesh-and-blood, here-and-now, in time and history. Not some abstract doctrine. Not some ancient historical figure read about in ancient books. But a real, living presence awakened within us. Let us, the church, fulfill God’s mission as Christ’s body to the desperate world we live in.