



GET PLUGGED IN!

Rev. Michael Anthony Howard
Brookside Community Church
Beloved Community Sunday
November 25, 2018
Revelation 1:4-8

The background is a dark blue gradient. It is decorated with numerous warm white string lights that are tangled and glowing. Several white snowflakes of different sizes are scattered across the image, some hanging from dotted lines. The text "GET PLUGGED IN!" is written in a large, bold, yellow sans-serif font, centered in the upper half of the image.

GET PLUGGED IN!

A small white snowflake icon is positioned to the left of the first line of text.

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A small white snowflake icon is positioned to the right of the text.A small white snowflake icon is positioned at the bottom right of the text.

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Brookside Community Church
PO BOX 490
Brookside, NJ 07926

www.michaelanthonyhoward.com

My somebodiness derives from God and thrives on your somebodiness. So caring for our mutual connection—to God and each other—is the source of our wellbeing. It is essential. It is sacred.

The Changing of Seasons

How many of us just spent the weekend putting up Christmas decorations? Yep, it's that time again. The seasons are changing, we are putting up the pumpkins and putting out the lights. Hundreds and thousands of lights. They shine bright—shining into the dark, into our bedrooms, keeping us awake all hours of the night.

It is also a day in the life of the church when we change seasons, decorations, themes. Next week we begin Advent. Today, however, we celebrate the end of one liturgical year and the beginning of the other. Today we celebrate what is traditionally known as “Christ the King” Sunday.

Christ the King Sunday is the day the church has set aside to honor the unique “kingship” of Jesus. The theological framework of “Christ the King” is so central to our tradition that it provides the framework for our denomination's symbol. Jesus (symbolized by the cross) is portrayed as the king of the world. A number of years ago, our tradition—the United Church of Christ—decided that we would follow the theological tide pushed forward by feminism and largely began to view patriarchal theological language with suspicion, including the language of “king” and “kingdom.” This critical awareness awakened us to work that many thinkers and preachers have done over the years to find newer, fresher, richer ways to talk articulate the teachings of Jesus. This critical awareness allowed us to rethink the central metaphor of the gospels, borrowed from the Greco-Roman concept of *Basileia tou Theou*, generally translated as Kingdom of God. In Jesus' day and age, the term largely meant “empire.” But in the context of Jesus' teachings, the term was being borrowed in order to subvert it, to undo it, to challenge the notions of the empires of the world with an alternative framework. The *Basileia* movement that began with Jesus allows us to catch a glimpse of what it might look like if, instead of the violent empires of the world, God were in charge.

Mark Van Steenwyk, a young radical thinker that has influenced a lot of folks like myself in recent years called it the “*unkingdom of God*.”

“Before we can see the [Basileia tou Theou] reality, we must first repent of the old order. Before we can experience the joy of unkingdom, we must mourn over the empire... We must mourn the old world, the old ways and its cycle of death—the cycle of greed and violence and oppression—as we move into the unkingdom of God.”¹

I think the “unkingdom” framework is extremely helpful. But it is largely deconstructive—it helps undo the harsh paradigm of domination that comes with kingdom language. Going forward, what we need is a constructive language. What language do we use if we are looking for language to refer to more than just God was undoing? Most of you know by now that a central theme in the my own theological framework, inspired by the teachings of Dr. King, is Beloved Community. I believe the language of building a Beloved Community really does get at the heart of Jesus's teachings, in a way that describes that kind of alternative community Jesus was calling his followers to participate in building together. That is why, instead of calling today “Christ the King” Sunday, I want to invite us to refer to it as “Beloved Community Sunday.” And to help illustrate for us what the Beloved Community looks like, I am going to talk about Christmas lights.

¹ Mark Van Steenwyk, *The Unkingdom of God: Embracing the Subversive Power of Repentance* (Downers Grove, IL : IVP Books, 2013), p. 132.

The Light of Christ and Light of the World

This past weekend, many of you probably participated some common cultural ritual practices. Thanksgiving, you gathered with family and friends and ate a meal. Some of you then gathered around the television to watch football or a special movie. Many families then went the next step further toward the Christmas season and put up Christmas decorations. Perhaps some of you are like me and the idea of putting up Christmas lights immediately reminds you of Chevy Chase playing Clark Griswold with his 25,000 lights. Do you remember the days when you would plug in a set of lights and then it wouldn't work, forcing you to check every bulb? Unless every bulb was plugged in and working, the lights wouldn't come on. I believe the day is coming, and perhaps it is already here, when every bulb on every strand of lights will shine—where we no longer have to wrestle to untangle those strands and check every bulb, but where strand will be straightened and connected, where every bulb will work, and where the tree will shine for all the world to see!

This is how I think about the Beloved Community: we are a connected strand of lights designed to shine the love of God out into the world. But the effectiveness of our connected belovedness depends on the recognition, affirmation, care, support of each of our individual belovedness.

Channeling Dr. King's, Donald M. Chinula describes the Beloved Community this way:

*"Nobody is a nobody. Everyone is a somebody. Somebodiness is never earned or conferred. It is innate. It is a right. It is divine. It is ontological. My somebodiness derives from God and thrives on your somebodiness. The two are interdependent and mutually inclusive. My nobodiness disparages and degrades your somebodies. You cannot rightfully claim to be somebody when you cause or tolerate my nobodiness."*²

For these Christmas lights, the light they shine is dependent on two things—their connection to the power source and their connection with each other. The source of our belovedness is God. But it thrives on our interconnection with a community that protects and affirms it.

So, you ask, what does this have to do with Jesus? OK, so you want the Christmas story already?

Well, I want you to imagine it is the pitch dark of night and you are trying to get the lights on your tree to work. If Christ is like the start that lights up the top of the tree, it allows enough light for us to plug in the others so that they can shine too. Jesus came into a dark world to shine a light, to allow us to see what it can look like if we tap into the source of our belovedness and shine that belovedness to the world all around us. Jesus is not only the light, Jesus is the "first born," allowing each of us to connect with God and shine our own belovedness into the world. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said.

If my somebodies derives from God and thrives on your somebodies, then caring for our mutual connection—our connection to God and each other—is the source of our wellbeing. It is essential. It is sacred.

What I want to leave you with this morning is a challenge. How does our church community operate to turn the Beloved Community into a reality? What are the concrete ways your

² Donald M. Chinula, *Building King's Beloved Community* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. xiv.

somebodiness, your belovedness, is being supported and affirmed here? How are you plugged in? There are two parts to this. First, as a community we have to work to creatively find ways that everyone can be plugged in. Secondly, as individuals, we need to be committed to exploring with each other the ways that we can be plugged in individually.

My prayer this morning is that we can be a congregation where everyone is plugged in. I don't just mean a vision where all of our committees can have the right number of people showing up to monthly meetings. What I mean is that we begin again, looking at each individual one of us and exploring our passions and gifts together. What I mean is that we make it our pledge not just to do good in the world, but that we strive to make sure all of us are connected. My prayer is that we become a church that strives to be the Beloved Community, where "nobody is a nobody." Where "everybody is a somebody." Where each of us are connected in such a way that we shine together the light of God's love out into the world.

May it be so...

AMEN.