



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

HE LIVES IN YOU

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ AUGUST 1, 2021

COMMUNION MEDITATION

In 1994 Disney released an animated film called *The Lion King* that smashed all box office records, taking in \$783 million worldwide in its first year. It became a classic, and a favorite of children everywhere. Recognizing that the story and songs had potential as a cross-over adult hit if adapted for the stage, the company hired a top director and playwright, and a leading choreographer. The plot was expanded and given more nuance, the characters were expanded, more songs were written, and some phenomenal costumes, sets, and staging were developed. Those of you who have seen *The Lion King* on the stage were probably stunned not only by the rich African-themed music but also by the amazing spectacle of actors becoming animals in most remarkable ways. The play opened off-Broadway in Minneapolis in June 1997, and on Broadway in November of that year. It has been running continuously since (except for COVID interruptions), and has also had extensive runs in London, Toronto, and Los Angeles. Touring companies have taken the musical across the U.S. repeatedly, and to every continent. I suspect many of you have seen it on the stage.

The plot, in case you haven't seen the movie or the play, is drawn from some of the classic stories of all time. We have echoes of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, as a young prince deals with the betrayal of his uncle, who kills his father the king and usurps the throne. We have echoes of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as a boy runs away from home and then finally decides to return. And we have echoes of the story of Moses, who fled his homeland and people as a fugitive,

but then received a calling to return, confront a tyrant, and rescue them. The music beautifully follows the story—with lots of spiritual themes and connections woven throughout. The most popular songs of *The Lion King* are the opening theme (“The Circle of Life”) and the love song (“Can You Feel the Love Tonight”)—both written by rock star Elton John. But I believe the most powerful song—and the one that serves as the psychological and spiritual turning point of the story—is called “He Lives In You,” by musical collaborators Mark Mancina, Jay Rifkin and Lebo M.

Young Simba the prince, now grown from a cub on the run, has been living the carefree life of “hakuna matata” with his buddies Timon the meerkat and Pumbaa the warthog. But one moonlit evening, as he bends down to a clear pool to drink, he sees his reflection in the water and is stunned to recognize the face of his father. He realizes he is no longer a young cub but a grown lion, and a spiritual transformation begins in him. He senses that his father’s spirit is in him and is prompting him to return to his homeland and fight to reclaim his throne. Listen to these words:

Night and the spirit of life calling
And a voice, with the fear of a child, answers
This is the throne of our ancestors
Wait! There’s no mountain too great
Hear the words and have faith, have faith

He lives in you, He lives in me
He watches over everything we see
Into the water, into the truth
In your reflection, He lives in you

Our scripture text for today is a short but pregnant statement from the first chapter of Colossians, written by the Apostle Paul. He is trying to explain to the first generation of believers in Jesus Christ who He really is, and the impact He can make on a person’s life. And it is, you will see, a 2,000-year-old expression of a concept that is adopted in the contemporary *Lion King*. Here’s what it says:

For God wanted them [all Christians] to know
that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too.

And this is the secret: Christ lives in you.

This gives you assurance of sharing his glory.

Colossians 1:27 (NLT)

In other words: **“He lives in you.”**

The first ones to discover and experience the Christian faith—those men and women whose words and actions and emotions are recorded in the pages of the New Testament—struggled to express to others what was so unique and so different about this new faith of theirs. They insisted to everyone who listened that it was not just another religion. All religious expressions since the beginning of the human race have been variations on the same: attempts to placate a deity, as he was imagined or feared to be, usually by a combination of following various moral codes and performing various rituals of worship. But these people who took upon themselves the title “Christians” or “Followers of Christ” denied that they were pursuing religion. We’ve tried all those, they insisted. This is something profoundly different, something qualitatively and fundamentally unique. There is nothing else like this.

And in one of his attempts at explaining what can ultimately only be grasped when it is personally experienced, Paul used the words of our text. He says, “And this is the secret...” [we’ve discovered]. Now if I know a secret, the only way you will know it is if I reveal it to you. Otherwise you would not be able to find it out. In the same way spiritually, while we can learn some things about the Creator of the universe—His wonder, His order, His brilliance, His design—we would not know His plans and intentions for a personal relationship with human beings unless He revealed it to us. That is the secret that has now been shared. And that secret, that revealed truth, is that God desires to live inside of each of us, in a personal way. But how do we make sense of something like this, something so beyond our material world?

In a few minutes we will participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the sacred meal of the church. This symbol hints at the same truth that Paul was trying to communicate in Colossians 1. We know well from our lifetime experience the process of eating and drinking. We do it every day. And we know that, through some mysterious and amazing process working unseen within us, somehow the elements of the food and drink we consume actually become part of us. They give us energy, sustain us, and replenish us. It is no accident that Jesus chose this symbol, for He means to remind us in the Sacrament that, just as what we eat and drink becomes part of us, so He enters in to become part of us.

There were other ways in which the truth of His living within us is expressed in the New Testament. On the very same night Jesus gave His disciples the holy meal of Communion, He also used another visual example. As they were traveling towards the Garden of Gethsemane, He pointed out a vineyard along the way. Just as the branches must be attached to the vine itself in order to live and produce fruit, so (in a spiritual sense) every believer in Jesus must be attached to Him. For the life of the vine (what botanists have now discovered as the natural process of nourishment flowing up the trunk and into the leaves) is the only thing that sustains the life of the branches. The vine must “live in” the branches.

And in the final book of the Bible, Revelation, Jesus speaks again of the necessity of His living within us. In Revelation 3:20, He uses the image of the door to a home. “I am standing at [your] door and knocking,” He says. “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me” (i.e., live with him). Again it is clearly stated: Christianity is not about religious rituals or rules, but about a relationship with Christ in which He lives within us.

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the image of Revelation 3, he pictured Jesus knocking on your front door or mine and being welcomed into the living room for a nice visit. But it doesn't have to stop there. As the simple story progresses, the owner of the home decides that he needs to invite the Lord into other parts of his house (meaning, of course, other areas of his life).

And so, gradually, the host welcomes Jesus into the "work room" (his working life), and the "dining room" (his appetites and desires), and the "library" (his thought life, what he allows into his mind), and finally the "dark closet" where the most unappealing parts are stored away. At each step, the Lord acts as a gentleman—never forcing His way. But at each point He offers to come into that area of life to clean it up and transform it.

This is the concept I want to leave with you: the realization that Jesus Christ wants to be part of every area of our lives, not just the Sunday morning part. He wants to live His life fully in and through us, including our jobs and careers, our marriages and families, our community life and politics, our hobbies and our habits, what we put into our bodies and what we put out past our tongues, what we think and feel. The more we will consciously and willingly allow Him into each area, the greater difference He will make in us.

There may be someone here today who is encountering this truth for the first time. You have never realized that Jesus Christ can live within you. You realize that you need Him in your life, that you would like Him to forgive you for all the dumb and selfish things you've done. You are willing to try, to open the door at His knocking.

And there may be someone who long ago invited Jesus to come into the formal living room, but you've kept Him isolated there. And this morning you hear His voice asking, "Can you take Me with you into another area?" Perhaps you need to invite Him to be part of a difficult relationship you're having, or part of the pressures and struggles you're experiencing on your job or in your finances, or part of how you deal with your spouse, or part of the worries and fears you're having about the future. Welcome Him, for He lives in you! ■



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