

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**  
**SERMON: “KANAKA WAI WAI”**  
**REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN**  
**Sunday, October 13, 2024**

**Scripture: Mark 10:17-31**

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money[a] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is[b] to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another,[c] “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

28 Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news[d] 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

**Sermon: Kanaka Waiwai**

Does Anyone Miss Old Hawaii?

I hear this sentiment often from those born and raised here: Hawaii isn’t the same place it once was. The sugar cane and banana fields that once defined our landscape have given way to sprawling tourism and military bases, and traffic now clogs the roads where peaceful drives once ruled. Waikiki, once a symbol of natural beauty, is crowded with high-rise buildings and pollution. And perhaps the most painful of all, the Aloha Spirit is being slowly diluted by an influx of people from the mainland, replacing locals and bringing with them a sense of rush and rudeness that feels foreign to the islands.

As a transplant myself, I wrestle with this too. I often ask, and I think many in our community ask: How do we hold on to the soul of old Hawaii, while accepting the changes we cannot control?

In these moments, I find solace in places that remind me of the Hawaii I fell in love with. My family and I often go to the beaches in Waianae, where our kids were born and raised. Our son, Adam, took his first steps at Pokai Bay beach park, and we return often to reconnect with those memories. Waianae is different from places like Kailua—it still holds onto traditions and community in a way that feels like a glimpse of old Hawaii. At the beaches, you’ll find families gathered for big celebrations, roasting pigs in imu pits, and always—always—there’s music. Sometimes it’s reggae from a live band; sometimes it’s families playing country music from a speaker. But amidst the diversity of sounds, there’s one hymn I often hear: Kanaka Waiwai.

For those unfamiliar with the song or its lyrics, Kanaka Waiwai tells the story of the Rich Man from Mark 10, where Jesus challenges the man to sell all he owns and follow Him. The hymn was composed by John Kameaaloha Almeida, a blind musician from the early 20th century, known for his deep love of Hawaii and its culture. Almeida faced enormous hardships—he was blind, his father abandoned him, and he grew up under the hānai care of family friends in Waianae. He lived through one of Hawaii’s darkest periods, as the Kingdom fell and the U.S. forces took control.

Some say that Kanaka Waiwai was rejected by the missionary churches at the time because it was “too Hawaiian”—at a time when missionaries were trying to whitewash Hawaiian culture. Yet, despite these obstacles, Almeida’s song has lived on, echoing across our beaches, grocery stores, and family gatherings, blending with hip hop, reggae, and country music, standing as a symbol of something much deeper: the resilience of the humble and the overlooked.

In many ways, John Almeida embodies the principle Jesus taught when He said, “The last will be first.” Almeida, blind, poor, and living in a time of cultural oppression, created a song that has transcended time, a testament to the enduring power of faith, culture, and humility. His life, like the song, is an example of how God often chooses to work through the meek and lowly. When this song is laced into our modern lives, it acts as a testament to this commitment to follow God’s walk with the meek and the humble instead of selling out enticement of riches and power.

So, what does this mean for us? When we see the changes around us—whether it’s the rapid development of our islands, or the personal battles we face like illness, financial struggles, or broken relationships—it’s easy to feel overwhelmed, as though the powerful forces of the world are winning. Like the Rich Man in Mark 10, we can become fixated on the things we hold dear—our possessions, our health, our pride—thinking that these are what give us security and fulfillment.

But Jesus tells the rich man to let go of these things, not because wealth is inherently evil, but because it can cloud what truly matters: a heart fully devoted to God. Fulfillment doesn’t come from status, wealth, or power; it comes from our willingness to follow Jesus, even in times of difficulty and uncertainty.

This is where the paradox of faith comes in. We think of humility and meekness as weakness, as if accepting these qualities means accepting defeat. But God flips that script by making the first last and the impossible possible. The meekness and humility of holding onto faith and culture despite the flashier draw of Westernization became acts of strength. The Hawaiians of John Almeida’s time

could have easily abandoned their language, culture, and music in favor of the more rich and powerful English. Yet, the Hawaiians of John Almeida's time until today have continued quietly singing Kanaka Waiwai in Hawaiian slack key against the pushback of the powerful against them.

By continuing to embrace the message of Kanaka Waiwai, we are aligning ourselves with the heart of God's kingdom—the meek and the humble. In doing so, we follow in the steps of those like John Almeida, whose faith was not in worldly power but in God's promise. Choosing to trust God through uncertain and difficult times is an act of spiritual resistance, not defeat. When we walk with the humble, just as Jesus did, we reflect God's work in the world, where His strength is made perfect in weakness. It is through this trust and faith in God, not in earthly power, that we keep alive the values of humility, compassion, and grace, even when the world threatens to overshadow them.

In our own lives, it's easy to feel like the changes we face—whether in Hawaii or in our personal struggles—are too much. But remember: God isn't found in the skyscrapers or in the rush of modern life. He's not working through the forces that threaten to erase tradition and culture. God is working in the quiet places, the places of humility and resilience. The places that seem small and insignificant to the world are where God's power is most evident.

Just as John Almeida refused to let the powers of his time silence his culture or his faith, we too must be vigilant. We need to listen, to respect what is sacred, and to hold onto the places of humility within ourselves. When we feel the pull to chase after the things that seem more powerful, more accepted, we may be missing out on the very places where God is already at work.

Think about the resilience of Kanaka Waiwai—how it has survived and thrived despite efforts to suppress it, just like John Almeida's life. This is the kind of persistence and faith God calls us to have. The world around us may change, but our values—humility, faith, and perseverance—remain timeless. And like the song, they can endure and transform the world in ways we may not even see.

When we hear Kanaka Waiwai mixed in with the rhythms of contemporary life, it's not just a song—it's a reminder of God's enduring presence with the humble, the faithful, and the overlooked. It's a call to hope, to resilience, to trust that no matter what forces seem to be at play in the world, God is still with us, empowering us to stand firm in our faith.

So, when you feel discouraged by the changes you see—whether it's the shifting culture of Hawaii, the challenges in your personal life, or the struggles of those you love—remember this: God sees you. He hasn't abandoned you. He is still working in you, in the humble places, in the quiet acts of faith you cling to.

Just as Kanaka Waiwai has survived, so too will your faith, your perseverance, and your hope. And in that, God will reveal His greatest strength.

Let that be your reminder today—that no matter what challenges you face, God's power and presence are with you. And just like the hymn that has lasted through the ages, so will God's grace in your life.

Amen.