

Christ the King (Last Sunday in Pentecost)

November 22, 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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May only God's word be spoken – May only God's word be heard.

It really is a bit of a loaded question. When you hear in this Gospel about "one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Who do you think of? The "me" is Jesus, who are the least of these in your mind?

If you go with your gut, it's often people like the poor that come to mind, people who have perhaps committed some crime, an evil act maybe – or maybe someone who is handicapped, either physically or mentally, or perhaps someone who has just not had the same education you have. Then there is the other category of the potential "least of these" – those who live in another area, another country with a different standard of living, perhaps something as simple as thinking of those folks from the south as being less than, or maybe people from the country, or people from the inner city. Who did you think of? Who is your "least of these?" Take a moment with this, and be honest with yourself.

How much of your list was similar to what we heard in the Gospel? Those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those who are a stranger, those who are naked, those who are in prison, those who are sick. Are these people part of your list of the "least of these"? It is with some intrigue that I offer again that which was offered as the fate of those who did nothing for the least of these.

We were offered in the Gospel, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Why? “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” So, in short, what we did or did not do for these folks we consider less than - this is what we do for Christ’s presence in the world.

There are days it is hard working at the shelter, but there are days that are wonderful, too. Days you see someone belly laugh at a movie – especially if they look like they have not laughed in a while. Days you can give someone a warm coat, knowing that this is someone who is currently sleeping outside, (and yes, it is starting to get cold out there!) The days where you greet a transgendered guest with a good afternoon, Ma’am. And you see the appreciation in their eyes.

But for all that, it’s not why I do this work – I do not consider these people to be the least of these. As soon as I start to think that these people are the “least of these” – I create a problem. I am, on some level in this approach, making myself the “better of these” working with the “least of these”, and I do not believe that is what we are meant to do. This is not about “look and see how good I am.”

Because, in all honesty, we may think this about someone else, but really there is an equal number out there who think *we* are the least of these, and we need to make our peace with that. It is not our job in life, regardless of what society tells us to be “better than” anyone else. As soon as we start to see people that way, we are forgetting they are children of God also – just like we are.

I suspect a few of you heard that and just maybe got your back up a little bit. Maybe thinking “they are homeless, and I have a good home”, or perhaps, “they take drugs, and I don’t” or “they drink, and I don’t”. Yes, perhaps some bad choices have been made in their lives, but if you can tell me in all honesty that *you* never made a bad choice in your life, I really need to speak to you – just to find out how you did it. We all have, on occasion, made those bad choices, myself included. There is an uncountable number of ways those bad choices can affect us. Some bad choices stick and take a while to work through, but through all of that we remain loved by God without question or condition – and we are all welcome at God’s table, no one any better or worse than anyone else.

When I was in seminary, one of the most interesting classes I took spoke to the problem of identifying anyone as “the other” because the teacher believed as soon as we thought that about someone else, making them “other” we were forgetting our own place in the grand scheme of things. When someone is “Other,” it is that much easier to say they are not as good as me – they are different. There are examples of this throughout scripture, but today’s Gospel is maybe one of the most obvious.

The separation of the people when the Son of Man comes into his glory is compared to the work of a shepherd. We are offered “he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.” The sheep and the goats are separated, creating that sense of other I mentioned. Let’s take a moment to note that the sheep are getting the preferred position, as the right side is the hand which gives blessings.

The sheep are blessed because they have done good. We hear “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Why do they receive this blessing? “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

With this blessing on the actions they have taken, their response cannot be described as joyous – it seems rather more that they are confused.

They ask ““Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”” But in the lack of awareness of who they were helping, they did good.

And, likewise, the goats being those who did not help. But in their lack of awareness, in their otherness, did they do wrong? Perhaps – we are offered “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” and “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

So we still have a problem. I do not believe, as I have described all through the sermon, that there is a right or wrong here. No better than, no least of these. The Jesus I know did not come to separate, but to open our eyes and hearts to see what and who we are.

This sounds unrelated but bear with me. Did anyone here see the movie Godspell? Made in 1973 – and it looks like it too! – it offers a good perspective on this story. Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, and, after telling the parable, happily leads the sheep off to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”, leaving the goats looking disappointed. Jesus comes back a moment later and signals to the goats saying “come on!” and leads them into the kingdom as he did the sheep.

No better than – no right or wrong – no other. All are welcome, all are forgiven. But the Gospel does ask that you keep your eyes and your heart open and think about what you are doing, and who you are doing it to.

Amen.