

Christ the King/ Reign of Christ Sunday, A
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

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Today we come to the very last Sunday of the church year, reflecting on the Reign of Christ, the influence of Jesus, the kingdom of God, which is changing this world slowly but surely, in God's time. One day we will see God's purposes fully realized on earth. But for now we live in an "already and not yet" time. We are already saved in Christ, but not yet experiencing the fullness of God's peace and healing and blessing for all things. Our calling is to live with faith and hope and compassion in this time between times, as we trust in God's reign and work toward is.

Reading today's scripture, I'm remembering some folks from my first parish in Albuquerque – three couples who passed from this life years ago: Mel and Bette Lee, Titus and Charlotte, John and Chris. As a young pastor, these folks taught me to care about "the last and the least." That was the expression they often used – and it seemed a little bit old-timey to me, even somewhat paternalistic. But I learned that phrase came from today's scripture – where Jesus says, *"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 for me."*

These couples were passionate about justice for "the last and the least." They believed any blessings they received were meant to be shared. Titus in particular had a passion for a ministry called the Storehouse, which gave away food and clothes and household goods – still does, there in Albuquerque, 35 years later. They all volunteered there. But they also became convinced that charity was not enough to create lasting change. They taught me about legislative advocacy – using our political power to change the system to benefit those in need. We spent many hours meeting with elected officials and supporting legislation to expand the social safety net. In a low-income state like New Mexico, where poverty was painfully obvious every day, this passion for the "last and the least" powered them and powered that congregation.

I think of those earnest Christians when I read today's scripture about the sheep and the goats – because for them this passage was good news. It was a source of motivation and meaningful purpose, a mission that brought them joy.

I have to admit I don't always read it that way. Even this morning, the words of judgment catch in my throat. There's a harsh edge I don't understand or welcome. The gospel of Matthew is sometimes called "the gospel of the church" because of its beautiful teachings about Christian mission. In Matthew we learn that God's people are light for the world, we are salt for the earth, we are yeast that can leaven the whole loaf of

humanity. How do we square this gorgeous, life-giving calling with stories of some people being sent into the outer darkness?

I can't explain it, and I grieve the way this passage has been abused to wound people. A dear friend shared that just hearing this parable read aloud actually reduced them to tears. It surfaced some deeply buried pain. This friend grew up in the Bible belt hearing this text often used to condemn people who were different and were judged to be outside God's love – including people discovering themselves to be gay, which was this person's own private experience growing up. There's a dark side to human nature that derives satisfaction from putting others down while justifying oneself. And there's unfortunately enough twisted psychological payoff that for too many people, religion has become primarily about declaring who's in and who's out, who's good enough and who is not. We see the damage spreading all around us today.

And some of us carry enough self-judgment and shame roiling around within ourselves that we are likely to hear condemnation in this story. We may get to worrying, *Am I a sheep or a goat? How does God really see me? Do I measure up? Have I done enough good to earn God's love? Could it somehow be that at the last day, God will reject me?*

It's very important that we take a deep breath, quiet our fears, and set our hearts at ease. Fear and shame are not what this parable is about – and not what God in Christ is all about. Fear and shame will only keep us from hearing the loving invitation that is here for us.

We do believe we are accountable to God for how we live. We do look ahead to some final day when Christ will return, but we don't claim to know exactly what that day will look like. We don't see it as a day of awful surprises, when unsuspecting people suddenly get sent to eternal punishment. Instead, we look to Christ's return with confidence and even joy. We welcome it. We see it completing Christ's saving work, leading all of us to a time and space beyond all imagining, when all things will be set right in God's justice, and every sin and distortion will be overcome.

We take God's judgment seriously, but we also trust completely in Christ's unconditional love and forgiveness. There is no human being who can stand before God on their own merit. Every single one of us continually depends on the abundant mercy of Christ. And we believe and trust that on that final day, Christ's love that went to the cross will continue to do its good work, drawing us ever more deeply into God's love.

So instead of getting sidetracked wondering, "What will happen to me at the last judgment?" we are free to receive this story of the sheep and the goats as a gift, and simply ask, what does God have for us here? For today, for our life together?

When we read in this spirit, we notice it's not really the story of the sheep and the goats. It's not primarily about us, in other words. Instead, it's about "the last and the least" (as

Mel & Bette Lee used to say). It is about the hungry, the thirsty, those called strangers, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned – and we may well add, it's about the addicted, the homeless, the mentally distressed, those physically suffering in our city. The focus is on people who require compassion and assistance, who are especially close to God's heart. It's about God's will for all people to receive what they need to live. God's will for all people to be drawn together in a community of mutual care, responsible for one another, lifting each other up.

We also notice that in this story it is not individual people who are standing before the throne – it is the nations that are gathered. Whole societies are being questioned about how they attend to the vulnerable people in their midst. It is not an individual calling – it is a shared calling, something to own together and work out together. We have a long ways to go with that high calling.

When we receive this scripture without fear, but with an open heart -- we realize it is not a specific prediction about the end time. Instead, it's a story, it's a parable meant to provoke us and stir up our thinking. To pose the central question: How will we treat each other in this "already and not yet time" as we wait and hope and trust and participate in God making all things new?

It's not so complicated, it turns out. We will treat each other with kindness. We will pay attention to those who are walking this earth with us. It turns out other people are not just bystanders to our own personal dramas -- they are the point of everything.

And there is a beautiful surprise for those who live with kindness and generosity, to the best of our human abilities. The beautiful surprise is this: When we show kindness to each other, that is when we actually meet Jesus Christ. There is sacred, holy, God-revealing beauty in the way opportunities we have to interact with one another. God meets us personally through our human attempts at love, clumsy and imperfect as they may be. And caring for each other is one way we are able to give back to God, in response to all God's blessings to us.

"Lord, when did we see you?" they asked.

And Christ said, "I'll tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

What a surprise! What a privilege. What a sacred mystery we are living every single day.

It's like Jesus is saying to us: Don't be so worried, dear ones. This good and sacred thing is already happening among you. You do know how to be light for the world, salt for the earth, yeast for the loaf. You do know how to bless this world in my name. Don't give up, dear ones, just keep at it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.