

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
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Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

When Christ is King

I'll bet you didn't come to church this morning saying Oh yes, it is Christ the King Sunday! I bet you thought of it as the Sunday after Thanksgiving, or, in some cases, as the Sunday someone very important in your family was going to be baptized.

Generally Christ the King Sunday falls on the Sunday we celebrate as Thanksgiving Sunday, the Sunday before the national holiday, so in a church in Plymouth Massachusetts any other suggested emphasis, well it kind of falls by the wayside. And generally the calendar falls so that the Sunday after Thanksgiving is the start of Advent - -so up go the wreaths, the garlands, the tree. We start preparing for Jesus birth. But this year, the way the calendar fell, it was as if there was an extra Sunday in there, a breather, and time to actually mark Christ the King, as we are doing today.

Christ the King Sunday is the newest day in the liturgical year. Added in 1925 by the Roman Catholic church in response to increasing secularization movements worldwide, but in particular to the plight of Mexican Christians who at that time were being told their government was due their ultimate allegiance. The people of

Mexico took to the streets shouting “Christ Is King!” “Cristo Rey!” After the changes that came with Vatican II, Rome moved the observance from October to the final Sunday of the Christian year, and many Protestants, including the United Church of Christ, followed suit.

So Christ the King Sunday is about loyalty, ultimate loyalty and who gets it. To say Jesus is Lord, or Jesus is King, is to say that there is no other power that is more deserving of our time, our energy, our devotion. As Emily Heath says in a UCC Still Speaking daily devotional: *“The message of Reign of Christ Sunday is that, once again, we have cycled through the story of the Christian year. And once again, on this last day, we proclaim that only Christ reigns supreme. No nation, leader, ideology, or thing can ever take the place of the only one that we should worship. And that is very good news.”*

(Sunday, November 26, 2017)

Which makes today’s scripture lesson interesting as a Christ the King text. Here is a king who is like *a shepherd*. who will separate out people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, sheep to the right hand, goats to the left according to one criteria: the mercy we have shown to others.

Did you notice in our reading today? What is remarkable about the scene Jesus describes is the surprise both sides show. Lord, when did we see you (hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison...)

Both sides ask this. The ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothes to the naked, the ones who visited the sick and those in prison it is striking that they did not see Jesus, did not see Jesus in the midst of this merciful activity As one commentator said, they entered into the joy of their master *without knowing it.* And the ones who did not respond, they didn’t see Jesus either. They didn’t see Jesus standing before them in the guise of another person. And they had their reasons for not showing mercy, they had reasons why those people shouldn’t or couldn’t be served... so the ones on the right and the ones on the left they are both surprised, surprised at what their response, or lack of response really meant.

We modern Christians don’t like judgment much. These days one of the worst things you can say about a religious person, or anyone for that matter, is that he or she *is so judgmental.* But there is judgment in this text. A time of reckoning. And it has, I believe, more to do with the quality of mercy shown than with actual works. Do we have a heart capable of feeling – and showing – mercy?

There is a magazine called Sojourners magazine, and it is put out by evangelical Christians – no, not the kind that stand on corners and ask “Are you Saved?” but ones who really want to put their feet where Jesus walked. The cover story of the most recent edition asked Lord, when did we see you Addicted? with pills and needles under those words. It told the story of several churches who have responded in very concrete ways to the opioid epidemic in their communities.

One of the pastors quoted was a seminary classmate of mine, who found herself working at a church that served the poor and homeless but who when someone OD'd on the church doorstep came to feel that what they were doing – mainly feeding and housing the homeless– was not enough. In order to have a hope of recovery, people needed a place, a safe place, to feel like home.

So churches in San Jose, California and Seattle and Spokane, Washington have opened something called The Recovery Café. A place within their churches, decorated in warm colors, looking not unlike a Starbucks or a Panera, where people get free meals, but also listening ears and companionship. It's a place to hang out and find hospitality, a place to break down the isolation that often comes with addiction. The article had pictures of people – young, old, black, white, Hispanic -- all holding signs saying "We Are the Face of Recovery". The place itself is run mainly by people in recovery, so the meals aren't really free—people in recovery prepare the food, stand at the counter, clean up. The success of the place depends largely on the people who need it. The only criteria is that you be drug and alcohol free for 24 hours.

One day a man showed up who had fallen short of that 24 hour sobriety. They had to ask him to leave. As he walked off down the alley, a staff member called after him, in the voice of a friend who does not give up, "We love you!" "I know" came the reply. "That's why I keep coming back.

Mercy is like that. It gives second chances. It keeps hoping for the best for the other person. And it hangs in there when things get rough, or painful, or disappointing.

This very morning I awoke to hear the NPR interview of Father Greg Boyle, the founder and director of Homeboy Industries that works with gang members in Los Angeles. Father Boyle was speaking of compassion that stands in awe of what some people have to carry and how different that is from standing in judgment from someone. He spoke of seeing yourself in kinship to someone else. That is a way of thinking of mercy. Perhaps too of imagining Christ as King.

A Facebook post from this week said *Rather than putting Christ back in Christmas I'd settle for putting Christ back in "Christians"*. I think many of us would agree. This week in fact a new document (written by clergy who dressed in sackcloth and ashes mourning the hijacking of our faith by those who call themselves Christian yet promote hatred and judgment) this document, called The Boston Declaration has begun to be circulated. It might be something worthwhile for us to discuss here at our church, as we seek to follow Jesus in authentic and faithful ways. But let us not forget the text has a word to speak to us.

Whose reality can you hardly imagine? Is it the person struggling with drug addiction? Is it the neighbor who drinks too much, whose husband beats her? Is it the refugee from a Muslim country or the person who thinks maybe they've been born into the wrong gender? Maybe there is someone close to you that you

need to be showing mercy towards. If your family is anything like mine, there is usually someone who comes to mind in the days after the family get together.

So the question is how can you move from thinking of these as someone other to thinking of them as someone with whom you share humanity? How can you learn more about the pain they carry and come to stand in awe rather than judgment about that?

What if, as Father Greg Boyle asks, God is compassionate loving kindness and we are asked to be God in the world? Where are we challenged to see Jesus standing in the lonely places the isolated, misunderstood places? Where are we challenged to live in deeper kinship, leaving off our tendency to want to separate the sheep from the goats, as if that were our job? Is this then what it means to live out our baptisms – to be God’s compassionate loving kindness in the world?

There is an old Jewish folktale story that really could be the gospel in a nutshell.

There were once two farmers who farmed together. They shared equally in all of the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own granary. One of the brothers was married and had a large family’ The other brother was single.

One day the single brother thought to himself “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly.

My brother had many mouths to feed, while I have but one. I know what I’ll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each Evening and put it in my brother’s granary.” So, each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain, placing it in his brother’s barn.

Now the married brother thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly” I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I will do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother’s granary. “ And he did.

Each morning the two brothers were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many.

One night the two brothers met each other halfway between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. And they embraced, and loved each other deeply.

There is a legend that says God looked down from heaven, saw the two brothers embracing, and said “I declare this to be a holy place, for I have witnessed extraordinary love here.” It is also said that on that spot Solomon built the first temple. (from *Stories for Telling: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers*, William White, p. 30-31)

Christ is King when people are behaving like that. And in that day the crown worn will be not here (head) but here – It will be in our hearts.

Amen.