

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season
November 22, 2020 – Christ the King Sunday

We come to the last Sunday of Pentecost that has its own title, Christ the King Sunday. The theme and lessons invite us to have the picture of Christ's final reign to fuel our imagination for living in our days under the rule of Christ. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus concludes the long teaching chapter (25) with the picture of the Son of Man with all the nations gathered around his throne compared to a shepherd with sheep and goats. Here is a message from Pastor Steve for the last Sunday of the Church Year.

Lessons for Christ the King Sunday

Eph. 1:15-23; Psalm 95:1-7a; Matthew 25:31-46

We conclude the Church Year with the concluding verses of Matthew 25 and Jesus' famous judgment scene. Following his words, Jesus will make his final way to the Cross. Along that way there will be judgment. Immediately, we will see Caiaphas and his fellow Jewish authorities make a judgement: Jesus must be arrested, Jesus must be killed. Once arrested, we will see Jesus brought before Pilate who makes his judgment to send Jesus to the Cross.

The familiar Gospel passage for today has been called "the Last Judgment". Jesus describes how the nations are gathered around the throne of the Son of Man for judgment, like a shepherd separating sheep and goats. I have seen many artistic presentations of the scene in museums. I remember being a bit confused in a German museum. I came to a picture with the Son of Man, with the throne, with the angels, with the sheep and goats. "Yes, I thought – I know this one!" But before I could pat myself on the back, I read the German title: "*Das juengste Gericht*". Literally, "the youngest - most recent – judgment". That can't be right, this is the picture of the final, the last judgment. I had to consult my German language authority, Jean. She said, "Yes, that is the German expression for the last judgment." Okay, I thought, another German figure of speech that doesn't make sense – get over it!

But, as I have thought about it – there is great truth in the German. If this is the **last** judgment – there will not be any more judgments = in all eternity. So, when you look back at this last judgment, it will forever be the most recent because no more are coming.

Now that we are lost in the weeds of German linguistics, let's go back to Jesus' depiction in Matthew 25. It is a picture of judgment. Before all is said and done, there will be a separation, sheep from goats, those who tended to Jesus and those who did not, those who will inherit the kingdom, those who will be looking at their future through eternal flames.

This parable can take us into the weeds of eternal life and eternal punishment; into the weeds of our own judgments about who is in, who is out; who will be where after the last – the most recent judgment. To avoid this, I would like to consider two other judgments that are part of this lesson, two other judgments made by Jesus.

The first judgment is about acts of mercy. Of all the acts of love and charity that one could imagine, there are six that make Jesus' **all-star, all mercy list**: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner. We might have expected to find some of these actions on Jesus' list, we would find them on anyone's 'good-things-to-do-list' – providing food and drink and clothing are part of basic social ministry outreach. St. John's modified Advent Fest will include receiving collections of food and clothing. We are probably not surprised to see Jesus' list includes caring for the sick. We know how important this is, we regularly surround the sick with our prayers. As we gather today, many of us are saddened by memories of these past months when visiting the sick was either not allowed or severely limited.

Jesus includes two other actions that might not have made our lists: welcoming the stranger and visiting the prisoners.

Welcoming the stranger is not a new idea for the Jewish people. The prophets again and again urged people to care for strangers, after all the prophets told them: *“you were strangers in the land of Egypt”*. Being welcomed is an incredible gift. I could stop here and describe the many times when I have been welcomed as a stranger; in Germany, in Slovakia, in Hungary. I could also tell you many stories of how I was welcomed as a stranger, in my own country – welcomed by several African-American congregations when I served at St. John in Overbrook.

Jesus concludes his list with visiting the prisoner. It was not easy back then, it is not easy today, to visit a person in prison. There are guards and gauntlets to get through. There is fear and there can be indifference – out of sight, out of mind. We have many prisoners in our country. They can be forgotten or neglected. Jesus does not forget them; they appear on the list.

In depicting the judgment scene, Jesus makes a judgment - six acts of mercy are important: giving food and drink and clothing, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, the prisoner.

Jesus makes another judgment in connection with these acts of mercy. He says: “When you did these acts of mercy to another, to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” ***“You did it to me!”*** This is how Jesus sees it, this is how he calls it. Jesus identifies with the least, with those who suffer, those who lack basic needs. Jesus says, “if you want to serve me, if you want to show me love, look around and take note of the people who need acts of mercy. We remember how Jesus began his ministry with the Sermon on the Mount: “blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek.” Yes, the least of these, those who have needs will be blessed. Jesus went on: “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers”. Yes, blessings come to those who respond to the least of these. The kingdom has a wonderful way to keep blessings circulating.

“You did it to me”, Jesus said. A saint in our day, Mother Teresa, took Jesus’ words to heart. She toiled for years ministering to the least of these in the slums of Calcutta. Her strong and courageous service was a witness to many. After she died, we learned that she had had her moments of doubt. This only served to make her witness even stronger. This is what she said about her acts of mercy: *“I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself this is the hungry Jesus; I must feed him. This is the sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus.”*

As I mentioned, Jesus is on his way to the Cross where he will face the judgment of human beings. His going to the Cross was the ultimate act of identifying with the ‘least of these’. We can think of Jesus going to the cross *hungry and thirsty*. We can think of Jesus being *stripped of his clothes*. We can think of Jesus *treated as a stranger*. We can think of Jesus *sick from his torture and mistreatment*. We can think of Jesus, a *prisoner taken to execution*. We can think of Jesus – going to the Cross, abandoned with no one offering him acts of mercy. Yes, Jesus did truly identify with the least of these. He went to the Cross, so that the judgment described in the parable **would not be** the last judgment. Yes, there would be another judgment made possible by Jesus’ act of mercy of going to the Cross. That judgment would be God’s offer of the forgiveness of sins to all who turn to him. God’s Cross judgment was that human beings could live their lives, make their judgments in life, knowing about the God’s Cross judgment that affects all our judgments, good and bad; knowing about God’s Cross judgment that gives us the gift of God’s most recent judgment on us, captured in the words we hear again and again: *“In the name of Jesus, your sins are forgiven.”*

In closing, I want to mention one more thing about the Chapter 25 scene. When the King makes the separation based on acts of mercy, both groups – the sheep group and the goat group – say the same thing: “When? When did we do this? When did we not do this?” They were not aware of their doing. We recall other words from the Sermon on the Mount: “*When you give alms, do not sound a trumpet ... no ... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?*” Isn’t this a wonderful picture of living in God’s kingdom under the umbrella of God’s Cross judgement? In last week’s parable, there was the invitation to “enter into the joy of the master”. Maybe this is the joy of the master: engaging in acts of mercy without considering who sees or who knows – ***mercy for mercy’s sake***, mercy for the sake of the other. Luther said it this way: “*God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does.*”

A Church Year ends, a new one begins, the Psalmist directs us in all our days:
Come let us sing to the Lord, let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation!

Amen