

Sermon for November 26, 2017 – “When?”

Christ the King/Reign of Christ, Year A – Texts: Ezek. 34:11-16, 20-24 Matthew 25:31-46

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There’s something terribly sad in today’s gospel reading. Something so easy to miss that it eludes most of us, including me until these last few weeks. Maybe because it’s so familiar and, in many ways so straightforward in its account of judgment. Judgment...Hmmm...Now there’s an interesting word. Certainly, a loaded word. Lots of meaning. Lots of imagery. Especially when it comes to what we call the “final judgment.” Here, interestingly, it’s connected to reaching out to those in need. And, when I say reaching out I mean **actively** reaching out to those in need, specifically, to “the least of these.” Those who are at the bottom. Those who are the most helpless. Those who often go without. Those who have no other champions. Those with no one else to care for them. These are God’s favorites. The ones God sees in a special way. And the text is really clear that those who are condemned aren’t condemned for doing bad things or for acting unjustly or cruelly. Nope. Instead, they’re condemned for the good that they **didn’t** do. It’s as I’ve said it repeatedly, and I’m thinking that this passage proves it, Christianity is NOT a spectator sport! You can’t sit on the sidelines, there’s just no way! There’s no way of avoiding engagement in order to avoid judgment. You can’t do it! “Well, I never intentionally hurt anybody” just ain’t gonna cut the mustard on Judgment Day. All of which makes it really tempting to say... “Jesus Christ is King, now get out there and serve Him and your neighbor”. “Do good and save your soul from judgment at the same time.” Which can make a heck of a sermon...Actually, it has – many of them in fact and will probably continue to be the basis for many sermons for years to come. And, it’s not like folks won’t need to hear it from time to time. It’s good stuff. Besides, it couldn’t hurt!

Yeah, but there’s oh so much more here, more than we may’ve ever realized, and probably not what we might be expecting. Besides, I want to talk about what’s so sad in this story. We start by noticing that those who’ve been gathered up at the right hand of the Lord, those who are called blessed of the father, the ones **we** want to be, they have only one thing to say to Jesus. They say, “Lord, when?” “When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food? “Or thirsty and gave you something to drink?” “When?” That’s it. That’s all they have to say. “When?” This is dreadfully sad because of all the loss and all the struggle and all the pain that question implies. These folks, the sheep, the saved, the good guys...They were right! They did all the right things, but they missed the greatest **joy** of it. They missed seeing the Lord! They overlooked the face of Christ in the faces of those they served. One of the reasons we have this parable may be to help us avoid that loss, to remind us what reaching out, what caring and serving **can** be about at the deepest level. Because it’s very clear no matter how right you are, no matter how much you serve Christ in others, if you don’t pay special attention, if you simply don’t look for the Lord Jesus in those you serve, then – like the saved people in the parable – you won’t see Him. And most of the joy is lost. Most of the joy of doing good and being right and saving your soul from the judgment all at the same time; most of that joy, is lost. After all, reaching out in love to the presence of Christ in others, especially in both “the least of these” and in those closest to us, this is quite often a gigantic pain in the “you-know-what!” It takes a lot of time. It often takes a lot of effort. And, there’s almost never any indication that anything of lasting benefit has happened.

Those that went on our last mission trip to Memphis or anyone who’s ever been on any mission trip, think about it. Did you leave knowing without a doubt that anything **permanent** happened? That all the problems you encountered were solved? Once and for all? That lives were changed now and forever for the better? Of course not! You may have touched a life or two. You may’ve done some good. But, let’s not kid ourselves. What’s more “the least of these”, you know who I mean, aren’t they usually at least **partially** responsible for whatever problems and needs make them the least? By the choices they’ve made?

And, most of the time they don't look, act, or smell the way we imagine Jesus should. Frequently, they aren't very nice. And, worse yet, they seldom seem to appreciate whatever we do try to do for them. So, doing good, reaching out to feed, clothe, visit, heal, and otherwise minister to "the least of these" tends to frustrate us. We tend to get burned and to get burned out. And, the same sort of thing can happen when the ones we reach out to are not some distant "them" but are, instead, the people we live with and around, the people closest to us proximity-wise. One would think that actually serving Christ shouldn't be as hard and as disheartening as it often is. But there we are.

Am I serious? Do I really believe everything I just said? Well, not entirely...but to some extent, yes. I mean, after all, just because we're doing something for religious reasons that doesn't necessarily mean that – in and of itself – whatever we're doing will **look** or **feel** religious. Nor does it necessarily mean that it'll affect us in a particularly profound way. Cleaning the kitchen in the church is still cleaning a kitchen. Being nice to a difficult person, even if you're convinced that Jesus wants you to, is still being nice to a difficult person. Spending time, money, or energy out of Christian conviction still means that you no longer have that time, money, or energy. But, we have to ask ourselves how are we serving? Why are we serving? What are our expectations of serving? Who's really being served here? Are we serving the "least of these?" Are we serving God? Or are we really serving ourselves? Because, you see it comes down to **what's** in our hearts and **who's** in our hearts. The Lord calls us to serve Him in our neighbors, in our brothers and sisters, in the least of these, and – often the most challenging – in those closest to us. That call is **real**. There are no excuses. But we must consider the nature of call. What our Lord might be up to when He calls someone, what He might be trying to accomplish in and through us. Is it about feeding hungry men in a shelter – yes! Is it about putting up some drywall, or fixing a roof, at someone's house after a flood or hurricane – yep! Is it about painting a shed, knocking down a brick wall, or building a work bench at half-way house for women – sure is! Is it about flying down to some third world country to offer much-needed medical service to people – you bet! Is it about visiting someone who's homebound – of course it is! Whatever we do it is absolutely about doing that thing. After all, people need our help.

But is that all it's about? No. It's about so much more. Something we rarely, if ever, consider. When we wrestle with the question of whether or not we will serve or with the difficulties themselves of serving difficult people and/or difficult situations, it's about more than we probably realize or imagine. Because, and here's the thing, the thing that we often fail to realize or forget altogether when the Lord calls us to serve He also calls us to see HIM in the face of our neighbors, in those of our brothers and sisters and, we mustn't forget, in the faces of least of these. Those whom we might not consider to be our brothers and sisters. This is a spiritual call, a call to discernment as much as it is a call to action and to service. There's no secret or mysterious way to do this. Here are two quick ideas: First of all, in order to see the Lord, we have to look at the people around us all the time. We need to do so constantly, deliberately. We need to **look** as we remember what we're doing, why we're doing it, and what we hope to come from it; mostly because it's not about **us**! Indeed, we need look on purpose to see what our Lord would have us see. Second, if we want Jesus to show Himself to us it helps to ask, sometimes repeatedly. That's one reason why reaching out to others in a way not wrapped in prayer, any act of ministry that's not consciously and deliberately offered to God unaccompanied by a request to be shown how God is in it while certainly not wasted effort is terribly incomplete. It's kind of like worship. You know, this thing we do every Sunday morning? There's a reason why the words "**We encourage you to take a moment to center yourself and prepare for worship**" are printed in the bulletin and why I invite you to do so just before the prelude often adding something about sensing/feeling God's presence. Without God, without asking to sense His presence or see His face, why are we doing what it is we might be doing? Think about that. God does need our service. God doesn't even need our worship, God's the same with or without it. He's worthy of it, absolutely and without question. Seriously, if anyone is worthy of serving, honoring, worshipping and all that, it's Christ our King. That's kind of why we set aside a Sunday where we focus on Jesus' kingship.

But this is a king of a different sort as Ezekiel shows us in our first reading. This is a king who desires a relationship with His people and who's gone to great lengths to reconcile Himself to His people. And if we're not asking – begging – Him to see His face in our prayers, in our music, in any of our acts of worship, in anything that's going on around us, then we're cheating ourselves and we're living in a way that barely scratches the surface of a much deeper reality in a way that risks missing the best part of it all. It risks missing the presence and power of Christ which can transform even the most tedious, mundane tasks into an opportunity for insight into both Him and ourselves. It risks missing an opportunity for joy, an opportunity to make the things to which we're called into a pathway that will take us deeper into the mystery of God's life, and of our own.

This story of judgment is more than a call to serve. It's more than a call to be good and to do the right thing. Sure, it's that, but as I hope I've shown, it's so much more. It's also a call to look, to notice, to devote our lives to the search for the face of God in all that we do. More than anything...it's a call to look, a call to see. When? Now!

Thanks be to God...

And to Christ our King

Amen and amen.