

Let us pray:

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom and open our hearts and minds that we may hear the cry of those brothers and sisters who are hurting and hungry and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today marks the last Sunday in the church year. It is Christ the King Sunday. In Matthew's Gospel, this discourse regarding the last judgment is the last teaching moment that Jesus has with the people *prior* to his arrest and crucifixion. It is the last time that Jesus is with the common people *as their rabbi* prior to the Pharisees executing their plot to finally get Jesus out of the way for good.

Over the past few weeks, we have been sharing from the 25th chapter of Matthew and we have heard of the need to be prepared – as in the parable of the bridesmaids, for example. Today, we hear from Jesus himself about the final judgment; the time when all of the nations are standing before Christ as Lord and Master and King of all the universe. The key movement is when the king separates those gathered there into 2 groups, the sheep and the goats. The sheep he places at his right hand and the goats he places at his left.

He invites the sheep to inherit the Kingdom prepared for them 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.”

Now, this confused the righteous ones and they asked, “When were you these things Lord?” When were YOU hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or a prisoner?

And Jesus replied to them “when you did it to the least of these, who are members of *my family*, you did it to me.”

After saying this to them, he addresses the others and orders them into the fire awaiting the devil and all of his minions because they did not feed the hungry or give something to drink to the thirsty or welcome the stranger or clothe the naked or visit with the sick or the prisoner. They did not do for the least of these and they did not do for Jesus.

Frankly this is a troubling vision on many levels, one of which is the idea that *in this passage*, Jesus is *bullying us* into caring for the poor... the poor that will always be with us. It also seems, on the surface, to be leading us toward the false idea that *what we do* gains us the kingdom... gains us *salvation*, if you will.

However, *I* believe that this is a *liberating* passage. Let me tell you why I think this way.

Let’s look at something held in common by both groups. If you look closely at the text, you will find that both the sheep and the goats are surprised when Jesus reveals that *he was represented* by the various groups that we are called to help. However, the difference *is in the heart of the response*.

The folks represented by the sheep are doing these things out of love. Remember what Jesus said the greatest commandment was “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your might and with all of your strength.” And your are to love your neighbor as yourself.

The sheep were responding to the needs of their fellow man out of *love*, not out of *obligation*.

The goats, however, responded out of *obligation*. They *grudgingly* did some of these things, but love of God and love of neighbor were not connected to their actions.

There is an old Irish legend about a king who had no children to succeed him on the throne. So, he had his messengers post signs in every town and village of his kingdom inviting qualified young men to apply for an interview with the king. This way the king hoped to be able to choose a successor before he died.

Two qualifications, especially, were stressed. The person must have a deep love for God and a deep love for his neighbor.

A young man saw one of the signs. He indeed had a deep love for God and neighbor. He felt a kind of inner voice telling him to apply for an interview.

But the young man was so poor that he didn't have decent clothes to wear to an interview. He also didn't have any money to buy provisions for the long journey to the king's castle.

So the young man prayed over the matter. He finally decided to beg for the clothes and the provisions that he needed. When everything was ready, he set out on his journey. One day, after a month of travel, the young man caught sight of the king's castle. It sat high on a hill off in the distance.

At about the same time, he also caught sight of a poor old beggar sitting by the side of the road. The beggar held out his hands and pleaded for help. "I'm hungry and cold," he said in a weak voice. "Could you give me something warm to wear and something nourishing to eat?"

The sight of the beggar moved the young man. He stripped off his warm outer clothes and exchanged them for the tattered old coat of the beggar. He also gave the beggar most of the provisions he had been carrying in his backpack for the return journey. Then, somewhat uncertainly, he walked on to the castle in tattered clothes and without enough food for his return trip.

When the young man arrived at the castle, guards met him at the gate. They took him to the visitors' area.

After a long wait, the young man was led in to see the king.

He bowed low before the throne. When he straightened up, the young man could hardly believe his eyes. He said to the king. "You were the beggar beside the road."

"That's right," said the king.

"Why did you do this to me?" asked the young man.

The king said, "I had to find out if you really *did* love God and neighbor." And then the king told him he had proved himself worthy and was the new heir to the throne. What a surprise that was. ¹

Responding out of love of God and neighbor *should* be our response. But what happens when we pack the food boxes and hand them out, but in our hearts we harbor resentment toward those that we don't think are doing enough?

Remember the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Or how about the words of the prophet Micah:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

The main point that I get out of this passage about judgment is that we put ourselves in danger when we judge others, either for the predicament in which they find themselves, or for their response, or lack of response, to those in need.

¹ Billy D. Strayhorn, Blessed to be a Blessing as found at esermons.com

If we love the Lord with all that we *are* and all that we *have* and we love our fellow man as we love ourselves, we will feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger and the immigrant, clothe the naked, care for sick and visit the prisoner. And we will do it not out of a sense of obligation, but we will do it because the love and grace that God has shared with us is overflowing. We will do it because we are living into our calling as disciples of Christ... **and the difference is liberating.**

Mother Theresa ministered to the untouchables of Indian society with such care and compassion and someone once asked her how she was able to find the strength to carry on. She replied “I see the face of Jesus in all of the people I serve.”

What an attitude to have.

Seeing the face of Christ in everyone we meet. That means that we must seek the face of Christ in everyone that we meet.

Once there was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it would be a long trip to where God lived, so he packed a suitcase full of Twinkies and cans of root beer (his two favorite foods) and set off on his journey. He had only gone a few blocks when he passed an older woman, sitting on a park bench and just staring at some pigeons. She looked sad and lonely, so the boy went over and sat down next to her. He opened his suitcase, took out a package of Twinkies and offered it to her.

She gratefully took it and smiled at him. Her smile was so warm and wonderful that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a can of his

root beer. Once again, she took it and smiled at him. The boy was delighted. They sat there all afternoon, eating the Twinkies, drinking the root beers and watching the pigeons, without saying a word to each other.

As it grew dark, the boy realized that he had better get started home and got up to leave. But before he had just a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the older woman and gave her a big hug. She gave him the biggest smile of all.

When the boy got home, his mother noticed how happy he seemed. So she asked him what he had done all day. He told her: "I had lunch with God. And you know what? She has the most beautiful smile that I've ever seen."

Meanwhile, the older woman had returned to her home. Her son also noticed how happy and contented she seemed so he asked her what she had done that had made her so happy. She said to him: "I sat in the park and ate Twinkies with God. You know, he's much younger than I expected."

By seeking the face of God in all of the people that we meet, then we will see a change in our lives as we respond in love to the needs around us.

"I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked ..." It is always a reality that critiques my well-honed comfort of my own "savedness," my quick dismissal of "the world" as that place of sin removed from my reality, my acceptance that after all, the poor will always be with us. For Jesus doesn't simply disappear into the sweet lilt of lapping deer, the gentle litany of whispered prayer, or the warmth of "the icon who forever caresses the lamb" affixed safely to the wall of the Sunday school room, fastened securely, never challenging, but always poised to mollify in a too-often violent and horrific world. Yet, as much as I might desire that these be the places where

Jesus remains carefully confined, he instead ventures into the lives of the most *broken*, the most *damaged*, the most *forgotten*, ... those little nobodies that are so often shut up, shouted down, and kept out.

"I was a stranger, I was sick, I was in prison. I am an 'illegal.' I am one with AIDS. I am the one who does the unthinkable. I am the Christ, the King."

But then, in the most amazing of occurrence, if I but dare to go there, to that place of *hopelessness* and *human devastation*, to that place that is often the point of my own creation and my own neglect, if I but dare go with all my limitations and fears and prejudices, I discover, it is not healing that I bring, but healing *that the Christ brings to me*, especially in those dark and lonely places of my own despair.

I had no right to expect it.

I had done nothing to deserve it.

And yet, in a bowl of food offered to a starving child, I too am saved. Goat that I am.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.