Christ the King

Matthew 25:31-40 Kimby Young

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On the church calendar, this is the last Sunday of the Christian year. Advent starts next week.

The beginning of Advent varies depending on the day of the week of Christmas. Today is designated “Christ the King Sunday” the day when we recognize the rule and reign of Jesus Christ on earth as in heaven, not just in the future and for all time, but here and now, and for all the world. Jesus is King. The kingdom of God has begun with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church year rehearses that entire story – preparation, birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus – so here on this last day of the church year we reflect on what the life of Jesus Christ as a whole means for the world. Through Jesus - God opened the door to heaven and made it possible for all people to start our eternal life with God now. We belong to God now, thanks to Jesus. So we must act like it, here and now – act as ones who belong to God in the kingdom of God, servants of Jesus Christ our Lord and King.

This scripture passage for today from Matthew 25, is the lectionary scripture passage assigned for every third year on this Sunday and it describes Jesus Christ as King. It’s not only talking about judgment day in some future time when you get to heaven – when the sheep and goats are separated. It is telling us how to live in the kingdom of God in the world today – how to interact and care for the people of the world today – God’s people today. Because how we treat others is a reflection of how we relate to God. Remember Jesus says, “As you did to the least of these – you did to Jesus.” As you love the least and the lost, so you serve God. I’ve heard it said that if you want to take the true measure of a person, don’t track how they treat their superiors or their peers, notice how they interact with those who work for them and those who serve – the bell boys, the maids, the janitors, the servants. How a person treats their supposed lesser, reveals who they truly are. Treat others with respect. Honor everyone. Be kind – especially to those who are in need. Give power to the vulnerable and strengthen the weak. Matthew 25 shows us how. It is so specific, so concrete. It convicts us of our own failures. It calls us to higher giving and caring, greater service and sacrifice. I carefully didn’t have us read the part about the goats – “the casting into eternal fire” section of this passage. I didn’t read that because frankly it makes me uncomfortable. I see myself in those mistakes. I remember driving past homeless folks. I remember times when I resented some person asking for money. I remember sometimes shaking my head and thinking judgmental nasty thoughts when I saw somebody doing something I wouldn’t do. But truly, in all these cases and more where I rush to prejudge, I don’t know their story. I don’t feel their burdens. I don’t live in their shoes. It is not my place to make judgments, even though I do. It is my place to look with love and to try to care, to be kind, at least to pray for God’s grace for others each day. “For I was hungry, and you gave…”

The scripture from Matthew 25 in addition to being the suggested lectionary for today, is the focus of an initiative in the national Presbyterian Church. I’ve talked about this program. The point is to answer God’s call and to follow Jesus Christ by serving the least among us – to start programs and ministries that help the most in need. The description on the denomination’s website says, “We recognize Christ’s urgent call to be a church of action, where God’s love, justice and mercy shine forth and are contagious.” The program encourages three areas of focus. They are - building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty.

The program reminds us that God is Saying, “I was hungry… and what are you going to do about it.” I am naked. I am homeless. I am afraid. I am alone. I am a stranger. I am … right outside this door. Maybe even just down the pew. How shall we welcome? And feed? And nurture? And protect? How shall we live in the kingdom of God and welcome others into the presence of Jesus Christ? How shall we stand beside the least? How shall we find the lost? How shall we lift the fallen and heal the broken? There is so much need in the world. You see the need in the world. And Jesus has the answer. Jesus is the answer. Jesus loves and calls us to love – with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind and all of your strength.

You already are very aligned with this verse and this call of God. Matthew 25 is the founding scripture for Joy Closet that literally puts clothes on people’s backs, and does a host of other beautiful caring ministries. As a congregation, you are very responsive to need – helping the people who are right in front of you. You are immediate about lifting up the poor, comforting the grieving, loving the lost. I know Jesus is saying to you, well done. And perhaps also, Jesus is saying, what’s next?

Friends, something is happening here. Right here in our congregation. Right here in our community. Right here in our world. We have gifts to offer. We have abundance to share. We have resources to spare. We have gratitude overflowing. We have grace unending. And in… in walks a stranger, wearing the face of God. How shall we welcome? How shall we respond? It’s time. Right now.

So maybe the stranger didn’t walk thru the doors. Maybe we have to go out into the world. Maybe we have to build the bridge to let them in – to introduce them to God, to share God’s love. Remember those points of the denominational program – congregational vitality or life, tearing down structures that destroy and divide, eliminating systems that put people down or put some people lower than other people. Attacking poverty - as the evil it is. Recognizing racism as not a color or a moment, but a process of exclusion and assumption. Listening to others. Hearing the pain. Seeing the truth. Knowing the grace. Experiencing the forgiveness. Living the joy of transformation, not the fear of change. Responding to Christ’s call.

Some. Thing. Is. Happening. Here.

And it is good. It is of God. It is about love. Because you belong to God.

There’s a line in a song from Les Miz, the play – and it was in Victor Hugo’s book Les Miserables before that. In the play it is sung to one who is dying by the characters who have already died, and reappear on stage. So for me this song represents the kingdom of heaven, the cloud of witnesses welcoming this new saint, but also encouraging all of us still living here in God’s kingdom on earth. They sing, “Remember… to love another person is to see the face of God.” That’s what Matthew is saying. That’s what Jesus taught every day in his living. “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Beloved child of God, that is our call. To see the face of God – to love someone, anyone - to serve the children of God – to care for the beloved of God – even the least of these, especially in the least of these. To love and to see the face of God - in the name of Jesus Christ, King of Kings. Amen.