

26 November 2023 || Christ the King Sunday
The Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Seeing Clearly
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Our second lesson this morning is from Matthew's gospel. In this gospel, Jesus is the GREAT TEACHER and this text is his last formal act of teaching.¹ Jesus and his disciples are two days from Passover and immediately after this the leaders of the day conspire to arrest and kill Jesus.

Listen for the Spirit is saying to you today.

Matthew 25:31-46

[Jesus said] 31“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

41Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

¹ Long, Thomas. Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew. p. 283.

“Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, the leader of the free world.”

That’s how a friend of mine — who is admittedly a bit of a provocateur — likes to welcome his congregation to worship on the Sunday before Advent.²

Today is not supposed to be known as the Sunday after Thanksgiving when we all wear our elastic waistbands. Its importance is not not — despite what the ads are telling you — that there are 29 shopping days until Christmas and deals to be had. On the church calendar — today is Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the day that we are reminded that Christ above all else deserves our allegiance, our loyalty.

So grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, the leader of the free world.

It’s a bit jarring, isn’t it? To put Christ in the place we usually reserve for the most powerful nation in the world. And yet that’s what we believe as Christians. That Christ is above all earthly powers; that our allegiance lies with him. Not with a global superpower or the invisible hand of the market or our own abilities. Our loyalty belongs with Christ alone.

There’s a lot of royal imagery in this scene Jesus describes.

All the nations of the world are gathered before the glorious throne of Jesus.

They royal court of angels is there.

The nations call him “Lord.”

The King sits in judgment, deciding their fate.

There is power here.

To divide the nations to his right and his left, to inherit the kingdom or to be cast aside into eternal fire.

It’s a picture of a triumphant Jesus, reigning in glory.

And yet, this particular king doesn’t trade in power and might. He goes from here to be captured and killed - which is not at all king-like. This particular king doesn’t trade in prestige or social circle or wealth. He will be abandoned, betrayed, denied - which is not at all king-like. We learn that this particular king doesn’t trade in status. This King is present in the world among “the least of these.”³

John Buchanan, longtime editor of the Christian Century, says, in this portrait we learn that God is not “a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. Jesus said God is here in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. God is here, particularly in your neighbor, the

² The friend in question is the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, senior pastor at Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC.

³ Long, p. 285.

one who needs you. You want to see the face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the children.”⁴

Jesus says that those who will be with him in eternal life are those who spend their lives NOW with him, among the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

This is why we as a church partner with the Free Minds Book Club to support those who are incarcerated.

This is why the children of our church make sandwiches every month and why so many of you will be here over the next three weeks making dinner for our neighbors who need a hot meal and a warm, safe place to eat.

This is why we connect with families who flee violence in their home countries and help them make new homes here in this country.

Why we purchase uniforms and winter coats for the girls at Excel Academy and build schools for children in Niger.

It’s why the deacons set up meal trains and pastors visit the sick and the Prayer Team prays for all of us.

Jesus told us the faithful church will be found among those who are vulnerable.⁵ That’s where we try to show up.

As much as it makes our Presbyterian-saved-by-grace-selves squirm, Jesus seems to be teaching us that “what and whom we choose make a difference.” In this last teaching he states clearly and forcefully that there are consequences to our actions. One preacher put it this way: “In a world that seems too big to be changed, our lives have more meaning and value than we imagine.”⁶

When I read this scripture, it’s hard not to focus on the dividing Jesus does. The sheep and the goats. Right and left. Eternal life and eternal fire. But did you notice what the two groups have in common? Two things:

- Both groups call Jesus Lord. It does not seem to be a teaching about believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior — the sheep and the goats both address him as such.
- Both groups are surprised to find out it was Jesus they were (or were not) ministering to.⁷

When did we see you?, the sheep ask. When did we see you hungry or thirsty and give you food and water? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you? When did we see you naked and give you clothing? When did we see you imprisoned and visit you? We didn’t know it was you, they seem to be saying.

⁴ Buchanan, John. Pastoral Essay in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p. 334.

⁵ Long, p. 286.

⁶ Armstrong, Lindsay P. Homiletical Essay in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p. 335.

⁷ Long, p. 285.

When did we see you?, the goats ask. When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or sick and did not take care of you? If we had known it was you...they seem to be saying.

Neither the sheep nor the goats realized it was Jesus in their midst. And that realization seems to be related to their sight: When did we see you? the sheep ask. When did we see you? the goats ask.

I suspect that is a key question for us to ask, too.

Who do we see? Who gets our attention?

And maybe even more importantly, who do we overlook? Who do we willfully NOT see?

One preacher said it this way:“what you can do and are called to do is not to ignore and overlook, but to look into a human face and to see there the face of Jesus Christ, because that is what he said.”⁸

There is power in who and what we see. There is power and humanity in being seen. I find it to be true, don't you, that when I truly look at someone or something, my own heart is stirred by theirs. I am reminded — as God reminds us over and over and over in the scriptures — that we are connected to each other. Truly I tell you, Jesus says, when you see one another, you see me. When you serve one another, you serve me. To show loyalty to this King is to show loyalty to his people.

I heard Rabbi Sharon Brous of the IKAR synagogue in Los Angeles on the Ezra Klein podcast last week. The conversation was rich and deep and focused on the spiritual practice of bearing witness — of really seeing; not turning away from what is truly happening. The conversation was between two American Jews focused on what it means for the Jewish people in particular to look clearly at what is really happening in Israel and Gaza - to see the decades of injustice done to Palestinians as Israel betrayed its own beliefs and became an occupying force, while at the same time feeling an existential threat to Jewish people that the terror attacks on 10/7 brought into stark relief for another generation of Jews, and now the realities of what they describe as a “horrific war.”

In the course of the conversation Rabbi Brous shared a Jewish Mishnah about how crucial it is to our humanity that we see one another. A Mishnah is part of the oral tradition of rabbinic story that clarifies the commandments of the Torah and were codified 2000 years ago. Rabbi Brous tells it this way:

This Mishnah tells of all the people going up to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on a holy pilgrimage. They would ascend the steps of the Temple Mount and go through the arched entryway and they would turn to the right and then circle

⁸ Buchanan, p. 332.

around the perimeter of the courtyard of this holy place and then exit where they came in.

This is true for everyone except, the Mishnah says, for someone who is broken-hearted. That person would go up to the Temple Mount, they would ascend the steps and go through the arched entryway and they would turn left. And every single person who would pass them coming from the right would have to stop their pilgrimage and ask this simple question — “What happened to you?”

And the person would say, “I’m broken-hearted. My loved one just died. I’m worried about my kid. I found a lump.”

And the people walking from right to left would have to stop and offer a blessing before they could continue on their pilgrimage.

Think about how profound this insight is, Rabbi Brous says. “You spend your whole life dreaming of going on this sacred pilgrimage to this holiest site on the holiest day and doing your circle around the courtyard. The last thing you want to do is stop and ask the person coming toward you is “are you ok? What happened to you?”

“And yet the only religious obligation you have that day is to SEE the other person in their suffering, to ask them their story, and offer them a blessing.

“And if you are broken-hearted, the last thing you want to do is show up in this space with all these people and go against the current in such a public and visible way. And yet your religious obligation is to do just that.

“When we are walking from right to left because we’re ok that day,” she says, “we can’t turn our eyes and our hearts from the person who is walking toward us broken that day.” Even if our work is righteous and holy and important. If we are circling from the right, we can’t turn our eyes from this person walking toward us. If we do turn our eyes away, our humanity is lost to us. It doesn’t only hurt the person who is broken. It hurts the whole of our society.⁹

Lord, when was it that we saw you? the sheep ask.

Lord, when was it that we saw you? the goats ask.

And the Lord of life said to them: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Church, let us have eyes to see and the courage to respond. Amen.

⁹ Rabbi Sharon Brous (Brouss) - Ezra Klein Show podcast, 11/17/23 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/17/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-sharon-brous.html?>