

“The Least of These”  
November 26, 2017  
Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
Christ the King Sunday

*"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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.*

*Then 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; 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.'*

*Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'*

*And 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.'*

*Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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.'*

*Then 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?'*

*Then 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.'*

*And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

On our Christian liturgical calendar today is Christ the King Sunday. Today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew is the conclusion the liturgical year, and next Sunday, with the beginning of Advent, we mark the beginning of a new liturgical year. If you remember, we have been working our way through Matthew's gospel since the first Sunday in Advent a year ago. It has been a long journey through Scriptures that challenge us much the way they challenged the early Christian communities who read

them first. But today culminates in what is called Christ the King Sunday; a day we recognize the reign of Jesus as King. It is a fitting way to finish our time in Matthew.

### A Different Kind of King

But Jesus is a different kind of king. The miracle of Jesus is that he is one with all humanity; not just caring about who he calls "*the least of these*," but identifying with them. Jesus is so completely different than any other king, and this is our blessing. We are coming off our Thanksgiving celebrations this week, and we are most thankful God has entered humanity, becoming one of us, appearing as Jesus the Christ, and expressing a love for the world that comes from a compassionate heart that beats at the center of the universe. But with Jesus we behold this jarring contrast: the King of kings and the *least of these*. And so, at the same time, in our odd faith, we celebrate the highest of the high and the lowest of the low.

### The Challenge

This passage is a challenging one, as has been everything we have heard in Matthew's gospel. In today's reading we hear of a reckoning in the end when all is assessed; a time when the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. It was a common theme in Matthew's time for religious people to be inquisitive about what would happen in the end of time. They had no idea when it would be, just like us. But if not when, Jesus does tell us something about what to expect at that time. But more than intentionally scaring his followers, Jesus, just before his arrest and crucifixion, explains what his disciples will need to know as they go out and begin a movement that will change the world. And this is a message for us today.

What do you do when you encounter someone in need? It might be a knock on the door, a call on the phone, or a chance meeting at work, or on the street, or at a store. But at some point there will be will be a stranger who is hungry and thirsty, who has no clothes, is quite sick and appears to have spent time in prison.

Oh, this is indeed a challenging passage from Matthew. Because, according to these Scriptures, when we turn our back on someone in need, we turn our back on Jesus.

### What Will Jesus Say to Us?

What will Jesus say to us? He talks about welcoming the stranger. We fear strangers. We are conditioned to be afraid of them. Our inclination is to not welcome but to avoid them. Why do we feel threatened by strangers? Maybe they will take something from us. Or, they may harm us. Perhaps we fear they may take over, or make us change. They are different than us. They eat different food and speak a different language. They are outsiders; foreigners perhaps, or immigrants or refugees; refugees displaced by war or by famine, or by natural disasters. What will we do with these strangers?

And there are different kinds of strangers, and refugees can be found in many places. Think of the spiritual refugees are all around us; people who have been disenfranchised from the church; people who feel they have been kicked out of the

church, and Christianity; or people who have had no choice, because of their conscience but to leave the church. They have become strangers in our land of faith. What will we do with those strangers?

May Jesus say to us, *“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”*

Think of all the food available on this planet and how still, there are so many people who are hungry; some who are literally starving to death. Food Aid Foundation reports that every year 1/3 of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted. —Poor nutrition causes nearly half (45%) of deaths in children under five - 3.1 million children each year.

—Some 795 million people in the world do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life. That's about one in nine people on earth.

—If women farmers had the same access to resources as men, the number of hungry in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million.

But then there are different kinds of hunger; it takes many forms. There are people who are hungry for some good news; hungry for some answers; hungry for justice. Do you see there are hungry people all around us who are being starved to death.

Let Jesus say to us, *“I was hungry and you gave me food.”*

Just the same, there are people who are dying of thirst. We take fresh water for granted. The Water Project, a not-for-profit organization, reports that 1 billion people on earth do not have access to safe drinking water. This leads to social and political instability, health risks, and loss of education and employment especially for women who are forced to spend all their time finding water for their families.

But there are different kinds of thirst; it takes on many forms. Right here in the United States a parched and weary nation torn apart by ideologies thirsts for healing and reconciliation that will feel like a cool drink of water.

Let Jesus to us, *“I was thirsty and you gave me a drink.”*

Then Jesus speaks of the naked. To be without clothes is to live in poverty. To be stripped of everything and face life naked and ashamed is what we see in the homeless. How cherished a coat must be when the weather turns cold. And how long has it been since a new pair of shoes has been on the feet that wander through the streets, and in the woods, and along the beach?

Poverty takes on many forms. And even in this land of plenty there are so many who struggle. Strangely, there is more than enough to go around.

May Jesus say, *“I was naked and you gave me clothing.”*

And Jesus talks of being sick—what is it to be sick and face the possibility of dying. Will there be someone to take care of us? The body breaks down over time; sometimes earlier than we want. And sometimes the soul can be sick. Sometimes the mind is troubled. Whatever the case, as human beings, at some point we need someone to take care of us. Will we all have access to that care?

May Jesus say, *“When I was sick, you took care of me.”*

And who knows of the darkness found inside the walls of a prison—perhaps the worst place to find yourself in this life. A place where all freedom is taken away, all dignity is lost; locked away from from the life that once held so much promise. Will

everyone forget about you because of the horrible things you have done? leaving you alone in your cell to waste away?

There are all kinds of prisons. Not every prison has cinder blocks and iron bars. Some are psychological prisons, some emotional, and some physical. They are just as confining and can be just as hopeless. Anyone who has ever known somebody our themselves been trapped in addiction knows what I am talking about.

Will Jesus say to us, *"I was in prison and you visited me."*

What kind of king is this Jesus anyway? How is it that he identifies with such a list of troubled souls? and that he says that by attending to all these things you attend to him.

Makes you wonder, on a day like today how we're going to treat Jesus when he shows up knocking on our door; when he's looking for a piece of food, a glass of water, and some clothes; when he's in the jail and sick with sores you cannot touch. He's just a stranger at the door, who is this stranger at the door? Behold, the king is at the door.

### The King of the Cross

We are Christians. We regard Jesus as the best of the best, the greatest of all, the fastest, the strongest, the smartest, the hippest, the coolest, the most. And certainly Jesus is. And yet at the same time he is *"the least of these,"* as he says. This is the image of Jesus that is hard to look at. This is the Jesus of the crucifixion. Hungry and thirsty, a man held in prison, naked, a body sick with shock, a stranger to those who once said they knew him, but who now hide away in fear. He's a king whose coronation puts him on a cross between two others who are also "the least of these."

This is not about pity. This is about mercy, which is different than pity. This is simply being at one with another human being, and being at one with God. This is about genuine compassion, which is different than operating from a place of pity, which says, "There but for the grace of God go I." No, this is more like, "There by the grace of God goes Jesus." The good news is the Christ identity is now in every human being in every nation. Because in whom would Jesus not identify? The Christ in me is the Christ in you.

### Our Mission

Where do we go from here, and what are we called to do? The mission is clear in the words of Jesus: Welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the people in prison.

The stranger is right outside our doors, sometimes knocking, and sometimes even wandering in. Outside these walls we encounter people every day who are hungry and thirsty. Feed them and give them something to drink. Consider who needs a coat, a pair of shoes or a scarf and hat for the coming cold weather. Take care of the sick as if taking care of Jesus himself and visit the ones in prison so their hope can be restored.

We are always being tempted to stay in our comfort zones where we are safe and secure and taking care of our own. That is why today's scripture from Matthew is particularly challenging. We hear the words of Jesus, but to put them into action will require stepping out and taking risks. This is the time to do it. What better way to keep

Jesus front and center in this time of year than to minister to others as if ministering to him, so one day we can hear the words,

*“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you 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.”*

*Amen.*