

Proper 29A 2017 Sermon, Christ the King

Matthew 25:31-46 *“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.”*

Today, as we do annually on the last Sunday of the Church Year, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. We deck our altar with white, our color of celebration, and we sing rousing songs that get the blood stirring, the adrenaline rushing. “Alleluia! Sing to Jesus! His the scepter, his the throne... his the victory alone!” “All hail the power of Jesus’ name!” “Crown him with many crowns!”¹

It’s dangerous stuff.

Dangerous because it is so easy to forget that the King’s crown is a crown of thorns, his throne is the cross, and he rules his kingdom by the mighty power of sacrificial love and servanthood. Indeed, to call a crucified man with a crown of thorns “king” is to turn the **world’s** understanding of what it is to be a king on its head; it is the height of irony and paradox. On the night before he is to be crucified, Jesus tells his disciples, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them... But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant.” (*Luke 22:25-26*)

The kind of kingship we celebrate today is the kind St. Paul speaks of when he writes that "...Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... *Therefore* God... highly exalted him..." (*Phil. 2:5-11*) God exalted Jesus **because** Jesus emptied himself, humbled himself, took the form of a slave, and became obedient even unto death on the cross. *This* is Christ our King.

So if, as we sing our hymns today, we find ourselves swept up in a sense of triumphalism, we should catch ourselves. For, paradoxically, as we sang in our first hymn, it is the songs of "**peaceful** Zion"² that thunder like a mighty flood; and Jesus has redeemed us not by the sword but "by his blood,"² by dying. In the hymn we just sang, we proclaimed that we are "Dead in the tomb with Christ our King."³ And while in our final hymn today we sing, "Lead on, O King eternal," we quickly add, "For not with swords' loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums, but deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes."⁴

With deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes. The author of that hymn could well have been thinking of today's Gospel parable as he wrote that phrase, for the King in today's Gospel judges according to "deeds of love and mercy."

Today's Gospel story goes like this: At the end of days, the Son of Man will sit on the throne of his glory and will separate people like a shepherd separates sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. To the sheep, he will say, "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 [sheep] 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.'" The king then turns to the goats and tells them that he was hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, and incarcerated and the goats did not lift a finger to help him. And just like the sheep, the goats ask, "When was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, homeless, stranger, naked, sick, and incarcerated?" John Shea believes that the goats are saying, in effect, "If we had known it was you, O King, and not some miserable nobody, of course we would have helped."⁵

The puzzling part of the parable is that the sheep do **not** act compassionately because **they** recognize the king in those who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, stranger, naked, sick, and incarcerated, while the goats do not. **Neither** the righteous sheep *nor* the unrighteous goats recognize the king in the "least of

these.” So **why** do the *sheep* act “with deeds of love and mercy,” while the *goats* do not?

Perhaps the sheep act compassionately because they see *themselves* in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and incarcerated. As I have explained in the past, the commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” can also be translated, “Love your neighbor who is as yourself” or “who is yourself.” Perhaps the sheep identified and empathized with “the least of these,” while the goats did not.

Or perhaps the sheep saw that there was simply some fundamental, inherent dignity and worth in these needy people. We promise in our baptismal vows, after all, to “respect the dignity of every human being.”⁶ Perhaps the sheep saw an inherent dignity in “the least of these,” while the goats did not.

But there is another possible explanation for the sheep’s merciful deeds toward the needy: The sheep are participating in the flow of God’s divine, loving, compassionate Spirit. Fr. John Shea writes: “The Christian ideal is for spirituality and [ethical behavior] to form a unified whole. Followers of Jesus love their neighbor from their soul, which is filled with the Spirit of God. The more they cultivate their relationship with God, the more they care for their neighbor. And the more they care for their neighbor, the more they open to the presence and influence of the Spirit. This intertwined, reciprocal, mutual relationship is never to be broken. ... Although Christian ethics may have philosophic rationales, the right actions are ultimately driven by the spiritual communion of the acting person with God. This gives the actions certain qualities. If these qualities are present in the caring action, we [conclude] that the Spirit is the ultimate [source]. So... we look at the qualities of the actions and discern the presence or absence of Spirit.”⁷

If there is **no** inherent kindness in the action, but there **is** a sense that the deed of mercy is being done in a calculating way in order to receive something in return or to draw attention to oneself, then those performing the action are likely **not** participating in the flow of divine Spirit. They are *disconnected* from abiding in God’s Spirit, and that disconnection and alienation from God is experienced, as we saw in last week’s sermon, as an “eternal fire.” The alienation itself is its own punishment. We are punished *by* our sins, not *for* them.

But if there **is** an inherent kindness in the action, and a **lack** of any sense that the deed of mercy is being done in order to receive something in return or to draw attention to oneself, then it is likely that the deed of mercy is proceeding from a heart filled with the Spirit of God. In participating in the flow of Spirit, we find our relationship with God strengthened, and that strengthened relationship only leads to *more* deeds of mercy. A growing connection with God and increasing acts of mercy form a cycle of growth in spirit and in compassionate action. Love God, love your neighbor. Love God more, love your neighbor more.

And was this not the pattern of **Jesus'** life? He would go off to a quiet place to pray, and would then return and heal the sick, feed the multitudes, welcome the outcast lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors, raise the dead to life. Then he would go off by himself again to pray, come back and perform "deeds of love and mercy," and the cycle would be repeated. Love God, love your neighbor. Love God, love your neighbor. And in the process, he changed the world.

This was the life of Jesus.

So perhaps, in the end, **this** is why the sheep act with deeds of love and mercy: not because they *recognize* Christ in the other, but because they **are** Christ *to* the other. In entering into the divine-human flow of Jesus' life – loving God and loving neighbor, loving God and loving neighbor – they have *become* like him. They have become "little Christs." And as C.S. Lewis wrote: "Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else."

And that is what is meant when, at the invitation to communion, I hold out the blessed bread and wine and say: "The body and blood of Christ. Behold who you are; become what you receive." The sheep act with deeds of love and mercy because they have become Christ to "the least of these."

And we are called to do the same.

AMEN

¹ Hymnal 1982, #460, #450, and # 494

² Hymnal 1982, #460

³ Hymnal 1982, #294

⁴ Hymnal 1982, #555

⁵ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 327

⁶ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305

⁷ Shea, pp. 327-328