

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 22, 2020

Prelude

Gathering

Call to Worship

Liturgist: Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

**All: Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.**

Liturgist: Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

**All: For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.**

Psalm 100

All Singing: 2 “O Worship the King”

God’s Greeting

Passing the Peace

Reconciliation

Liturgist: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.

**All: May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened in order that we may know the hope
to which we were called, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people,
and his incomparably great power for us who believe.**

Silent Reflection and Confession

Liturgist: That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ
from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms –

**All: far above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that
can be invoked, not only in this present age but also in the one to come.**

Liturgist: And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him head over
everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills
everything in every way.

Ephesians 1: 15-23 adapted

All Singing: 251 “The Church’s One Foundation”
Singing verses 1, 2, 3, and 5

Liturgist: Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling
you’ve received.

All: **May we be completely humble and gentle; bearing with one another in love.**

Liturgist: Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

All: **For we were called to one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father for all, who is over all and through all and in all.**

Ephesians 4: 1-6 adapted

Proclamation

All Singing: 303 "Healer of Our Every Ill"

Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: "A Symphony of Ignorance"

All Singing: 862 "Take Us as We Are, O God"

Dedication

Prayers of the People

All Singing: 353 “Rejoice, O Pure in Heart”
Singing verses 1 and 4

Benediction

Worship Leaders

Pianist / Organist: Dora Diephouse
Flutist: Lynn Hollender
Vocalists / Liturgists: Aron Reppmann, Helen Van Wyck
Prayer: Dan Diephouse
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Roger Nelson

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Text: Matthew 25: 31-46
Title: "A Symphony of Ignorance"
Date: 11.22.20
Roger Allen Nelson

Dear friends, this is the last parable or picture in the Gospel of Matthew; the rest of the gospel gallops toward crucifixion and resurrection. In this "most Jewish" of gospels, where Jesus is cast as the great rabbi, this is the last lesson. And there is a cinematic quality to the image that invites imagination.

Imagine, with me....

Grim gray clouds hang low over a rugged mountaintop, thunder rumbles, lightning splinters the sky, angels hang on heaven's rafters, and from his lofty throne the Son of Man scans the multitudes on a day of reckoning. All the nations are gathered together in order to be divided up:
the sheep from goats,
the right from the left,
the saved from the damned.

It is a dark foreboding picture. All who are herded before the judgment seat are put into one camp or the other not on the basis of faith,
not on the basis of birthright, baptism, or belief,
and not on the basis of their "relationship" with Jesus,
but on the basis of their response to the hungry, to the thirsty, to the outsider, to the sick and the imprisoned.

It is a dark foreboding picture. And it is an odd place to end. For on this, the last Sunday of the liturgical calendar, Jesus is not raised up in light and love to the heavenly realms, but this final crescendo is a picture of judgment on the basis of hospitality, compassion, and prison visits.

That gives one pause....

We traverse a year with the "good news of God" and this is where we end?
The king is on his throne, the scales are being weighed, eternity hangs in the balance, and now it comes down to what we do? Seriously?

There must be some mistake. This can't be the final exam. People should be sorted out by grace not by works. People should be sorted out by the character of God not the content of their actions. Surely it can't come down to what I do?
Cause, typically, I'm a goat.
Lord have mercy.

So, dear friends, what are we to make of this?

It strikes me that there are a few crucial turns.

The first has to do with eyesight.

Both those on the right and those on the left are stumped by when they saw Jesus. "Lord, when did we see you?" Both parties are befuddled because neither knew they'd seen Jesus. So, in part, the text turns on whom we see.

Over a quarter million Americans have died of COVID-19. 2000 people died yesterday and the expectations for the next few weeks or months are staggering. I've heard some of you argue that the numbers are inflated because of some scam where doctors and hospitals make more money if they label a death as due to COVID. I've also read that for a variety of reasons the actual number is probably tens of thousands higher. Either way, it's overwhelming and numbing. It's hard to comprehend, hard to know how to grieve, or respond, or process, or make sense. Hard to see beyond the numbers to the people....

It seems to me that part of the issue is that we don't see them. They're old, or they're black, or they're brown, or they're poor, or they have some other health issue. And they mostly die alone in hospitals and nursing homes without family by their side – out of sight.

In a recent interview a nurse in Iowa – a young man – told of leaving a patient as life ebbed away, thinking he'd be back before the patient died, only to return too late. His face twitched and his voice cracked as he spoke of his regret, guilt, and sense of resolve to not let anyone die alone under his care. When loved ones couldn't be present, he saw his calling to be present as family.

Neither the sheep nor the goats recognized Jesus. They all stood clueless before the throne of judgment. "Lord, when did we see you?"

Maybe the blessed sheep cared for the hungry, the thirsty, and the imprisoned not because they knew what they were looking for or who they were looking at, but because they simply saw them as family. They saw the aged, the infirmed, the poor, the hung-out-to-dry not as the objects of mercy, not as mission projects, and not as anonymous numbers, but as family – as someone's loved one.

I don't know if we're cast into the darkness because of who we fail to see and how we fail to respond, but I do know that this text calls and encourages us to see the image of God (Jesus Christ) in others and in seeing respond with love and compassion.

This last lesson of Jesus links the coming of the kingdom to how we see and treat the vulnerable and the marginalized – not as a means to save our souls or enhance our relationship with Jesus, but simply because it all hangs on the love of God and neighbor. As recorded earlier in Matthew:

Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?

Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

The second turn is that Jesus aligns himself or disguises himself in the hungry, the hurting, and those who are tossed aside. Jesus sides with the despised, the discarded, and the criminals – even those who are being executed.

Now, to quote Bruce Springsteen, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.” I don’t know anybody that isn’t thirsty or marginalized in some way. I don’t know anybody that isn’t bound in some manner of prison. And that’s where Jesus casts his lot. Jesus finds his place with common humanity. Because, with a boldfaced-biblical-confidence, Jesus sets an equation of equivalency:

When you serve them you serve me.
Don’t serve them and you don’t serve me.

The expectation of this text is not the eradication of poverty, freedom for the prisoner, or a comprehensive plan to rid the world of disease. The expectation is straightforward: Just as God visits us in Jesus so too would we visit others.

Barbara Brown Taylor gets at it this way:

The food, the drink, the welcome, the visit - all those things will follow in their own good time. They are necessary for life; they are not optional, but by themselves they are just quarters in a cup. Charity is no substitute for kinship. We are not called to be philanthropists or social workers, but brothers and sisters. We are called into relationship, even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary, or sad. We are called to look at each other and see Christ, who promises to be there where our eyes meet, and in that glance to teach us something we need to know.

Dear friends, even in this pandemic are there creative and compassionate ways that we can see, visit, and offer a warm coat? Are there people that we can visit in prison – even prisons of their own making?

And if there isn’t, if you can’t think of anyone, can we ask Jesus to change our sight lines so that we can see others? For according to the Gospel of Matthew, if you want to find Jesus, look among those who are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Again, I don’t know the implications for judgment and eternal destiny, but the promise is that there you will see the King, and there you will find the kingdom.

One last turn....

When it comes to seeing Jesus, in the end, the sheep are as inept as the goats. As we noted before, they both ask, “Lord, when did we see you?” William Willimon puts it this way:

Jesus’ story is more than a moralistic urging to perform ethically correct behavior; it’s a concluding symphony of ignorance....

I wonder if, far too often, we make of this text some secret key to the kingdom.

We may struggle with how scripture is interpreted, but at least we love and serve God and neighbor. We may not believe all the right things, but at least we are turned toward doing the right things....

And in the process, we make a similar standard as the doctrinal purists construct about belief. Either way both are putting rigor before grace. Both are putting belief or behavior before mercy. But, in the text all that the sheep or goats offer is ineptitude – a symphony of ignorance.

Maybe this last picture, before crucifixion and resurrection, is one more reminder that the glory of the gospel is that God takes our side. The mystery of the gospel is that Christ the King is one of the least of these –

the inept,
the infirmed,
the ignorant,
and even the ones who sometimes fail to see family.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.