

Matthew 25:31-46; Christ the King A; 11/26/17 Pastor Ellen Schoepf

Today, we come to the end of the church year calendar and the end of Matthew's version of Jesus' ministry. And, as we read this passage which caps the church year, we get high drama, we get harsh judgment, and we get punishment and damnation in eternal fire! As one who stands before you to proclaim the gospel, it is hard to read about such harsh judgment and punishment and then say, "The Good News of the Lord!" That just seems to go against the grain, especially for those of us who believe so fully and completely in a gracious God of love. It is initially difficult to find a picture of a gracious, loving God in this passage. However, if we dig a bit deeper, I think we discover this passage is not so much about punishment in eternal fire, and it's not the goats or the sheep that matter in this story; it **is all** about how we come face to face with God every day! And, it really **is** about a very loving and gracious God!

To better understand this parable, Christine Chakoian, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian, suggests we consider a contemporary metaphor – the reality TV show called ***Undercover Boss***. Many of you have probably seen that show, but for those who have not, each episode followed a different CEO as he or she would leave the comforts of his or her office for an undercover mission in the company. Each would do this to reconnect

with his or her work force and examine the inner workings of the company. As they worked alongside their employees, they would get an up-close look at both the good and the bad, while at the same time discovering the unsung heroes who make the company run. Then, at the end of the show and to the utter surprise of the employees, the CEO would reveal his or her true identity and share some observations.

Now, while this metaphor is not perfect, there are some connections we can make to the gospel message for this 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.” When he does this, he reveals that he has been undercover among them for some time, observing them at work, and it is time for the **big** reveal!

Yikes! I wonder how Jesus would judge his corporation right now. And yes, I use the word *corporation*, a word that comes from the same Latin root as *corpus* meaning body, as in the **body** of Christ. How is the corporation doing in this present world? How well do we as the community of Christ understand the corporation’s vision statement? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God; blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” How well do we live and function by the

company's creed? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and love your **neighbor** as yourself." How clear are we about the guidelines for promotion? "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." And, what about the company's ethics statement, how are we doing there? "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Are we fulfilling the CEO's mission? "Go therefore, and make disciples." Just maybe, we need to think about these things and do a wellness check on how we are doing.

And, what about the CEO's priorities – priorities that **always** focus on welcoming the outsiders, the least of these, the most vulnerable among us; priorities that reflect a politics of compassion and abundance? "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."

I must confess that for most of my life I read this parable in Matthew as a warning about how I must live and behave. I have seen it as a word of judgment saying, "If you blow it, you will be demoted to the realm of the goats!" Now, while personal responsibility and consequences **are** part of

this passage, the real question presented to us is one that asks about the **mission** of Christ's **corporation** – the corpus or **body of Christ**, the church, the faith **community** – and whether that mission is being accomplished through the employees.

Again, the metaphor is **not** perfect and I doubt the primary purpose of the incarnation was for our cosmic Boss to see how the company was running or to experience firsthand the challenges facing the field workers. However, when looking at this parable, the point **is** that Jesus introduces something new. While his words in this passage reflect the words of the prophets, Jesus adds something new by saying that when **we meet the one in need, we meet divinity**. Something more than a cup of water or a piece of bread changes hands: “As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” We find that when we give the cup, share the bread and share what we have with those in need, we encounter the presence of God in that person in need. We see God!

So, what about that wellness check? How are we doing? If we cannot share freely and fully or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus' triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued,

is a primary expression of our love of God and of our experience of God's love for us.

As members of the body of Christ we are called to respond to the needy and the hurting. We are called to welcome the stranger and the outsider in the same way that Jesus did. When we see situations like the intense, urgent need regarding these Samaritan kids who would likely face jail, deportation and death when they turn eighteen if they are not provided shelter, **we** are called to respond and help to offer them a future and a hope. When we actively live such radical hospitality and love for neighbor, we respond to **Christ**. We respond to the One who himself became totally vulnerable, entering into the deepest needs and pains of the world – even to the point of hanging on a cross, for the sake of **all** creation. And, guess what! Such radical hospitality reconstructs the social order! When we follow the one whose glory was revealed in the cross, **we** are transformed. And, the God who became needy and vulnerable for the sake of the world uses us to carry God's healing, transforming love wherever we go, for the sake of a broken and hurting world.