

**Matthew 25:31-46; Christ the King A; 11/22/20     Pastor Ellen Schoepf**

Today, we come to the end of the church year calendar and the end of our year-long focus on Matthew's version of the Jesus story. And, as we read today's gospel passage, we get high drama, harsh judgment, words of punishment, and words of damnation in eternal fire! So, as one who stands before you to proclaim the gospel, it is hard to read these words 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 hard to picture a gracious, loving God in this passage. Yet, if we dig a bit deeper, I think we discover today's gospel reading 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, a very loving and gracious God!**

I know most of us go to the doctor at least once a year and, when we make that yearly visit, we experience a **wellness** check. This year, at my wellness check, I was told that my cholesterol and blood pressure were both too high. So, my doctor told me what I needed to do to address the problem. And, following his advice, I began a daily exercise plan, I watch my diet more closely, and now take some medication to help address the issues. I say this because I believe that in today's gospel reading, Jesus

uses the language of the prophets to present a kind of wellness check for all of us, for each of us **individually** and for the **nations** as well.

Remember, just a few weeks ago, Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and to love your **neighbor** as yourself.

Well, today, as Jesus is facing his death, he who is often called **the great physician**, presents **us** with a kind of wellness check. In the story Jesus shares today, we discover the great physician, the Christ, is present in every person we meet, especially the most vulnerable. And, the great physician is really asking **us** and the **nations** to do a wellness check by looking at ourselves and asking, “How are we doing regarding what God desires **from** us and what Jesus has **taught** us? How we are living into the greatest commandment of which he spoke?”

Now, to better understand this parable and Christ’s presence to us in everyone we meet, one theologian also suggests we consider another contemporary metaphor – the reality TV show called ***Undercover Boss***. I am sure many of you have seen that show in which the boss, the CEO, goes undercover to see how things are going with the workers. 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, the Great Physician CEO, has been undercover among the people for some time, observing them at work, and it is time for the **big** reveal!

So, as we look at **ourselves** and our **nation** and do a wellness check, I wonder how Jesus, the Great Physician CEO, 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, the body, 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.” Are we fulfilling the CEO’s mission? “Go, therefore, and make disciples.” Just maybe, we need to think about these things and do an intense 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 **always**, always 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.” How is our wellness check going regarding these priorities? How is our **nation's** wellness check going regarding these priorities?

I must confess that for most of my life I read this parable in Matthew as a word of judgment saying, “If you blow it, you will be demoted to the realm of the goats and therefore burn in hell!” 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 **body** – the corpus or **body of Christ**, the church, the faith **community** – and whether that mission is being accomplished. How well are each of us living into that mission? How is that wellness check going?

Again, the undercover boss metaphor is **not** perfect. However, when looking at this parable, the point **is** that Jesus introduces something new. Jesus' words reflect the words of the prophets, but he adds something new

by saying that when **we meet the one in need, we meet divinity, we meet Christ.** When we welcome others, care for the sick, clothe and feed those in need, 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 very presence of God in that person in need. We see God, we see the face of the risen Christ!

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

As members of Christ's body, we are called to respond to the needy, the hurting, and to welcome the stranger and the outsider, not only in the same way that Jesus did, but also as Jesus welcomes **us**. When we see this present world in pain, when so many people in our very own communities are sick and suffering from this horrible virus, we are called **not** to focus on **our** presumed individual rights, but on the common good

and do what is necessary for the health, care and safety of our **neighbor!**

We are called to wear masks! So, just how is **that** wellness check going in our present culture? And, when our present leaders do nothing but perpetually lie, promulgate conspiracy theories, seek vengeance and act cruelly, and then those lies, the vengeance and the cruelty spread like a malignant cancer, how is **that wellness** check going for our **nation**? When eight million people in **our** country have slipped into poverty this year, when one in five children in our country are food insecure, when thousands are dying, when millions are losing their unemployment, and millions are about to be evicted from their homes, how is **that wellness** check going for our **nation**? Remember Jesus' words today when he says, "Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do it unto me."

Friends, when we actively **live** God's radical hospitality, love, and care for our neighbor and **all** others, we are responding to the risen **Christ**. We respond to the Great Physician, the One who himself became totally vulnerable, entering the deepest need and pain of the world – even to the point of hanging on a cross, for the sake of **all** creation and **all** people. And, guess what! **Such radical hospitality, care, and love reconstruct the social order!** When we follow the One whose glory was revealed in the cross, **we** are transformed and we, ourselves, live into the **healing** love

of the Great Physician. 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.