

Serving Christ the King
Matthew 25:31–46
Sunday, November 22, 2020

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the end of the liturgical year, the last Sunday of the church calendar. We start off the church year in Advent, waiting for the birth of Jesus, anticipating the coming of Christ, and then we follow the life and story of Jesus all the way through his death and resurrection and ascension and Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit, until today when we culminate the story of Christ by celebrating him as King of kings and Lord of lords, ruling and reigning over heaven and earth. And so it's only fitting that on the day when we mark the end of the church year, we do so with a story about *the end*. The lectionary provides us with this story of final judgment, when Christ comes again in glory, his kingdom is established on this earth, and he separates the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous.

So today is a lot about *endings*. But you know which *ending* I am most happy about right now? It actually happened a couple of weeks ago, but I'm still celebrating it. It's the end of the political candidate lawn signs on every street corner and every yard in every neighborhood. As winter is coming and everything is about to turn gray and brown, our green spaces are no longer covered up with dozens and dozens of signs. We get to enjoy them for a few more weeks.

I remember one day right before the election, I was leaving the church go home, and I was sitting at the red light at 30 and Waterloo, right by the TD Bank. And as I sat there, I looked around and counted literally *30 signs* from *one candidate* between the four corners of the intersection. They were *everywhere*. It was like legal graffiti. And I don't know if your neighborhood is like ours, but it seemed like every house had at least 3 or 4 signs in the yard. Some of them around us had 6 or 7, representing *every candidate* they were supporting. And there were a couple right

around us that I noticed, where one house would put up a sign for one presidential candidate, and then the house right across the street would put up a sign for the *opposing* candidate, and it would be *facing* their house. Nobody was *talking* to each other, they were just putting up *signs* to show which candidate they support. And now, thankfully, mercifully, that's over. But that's what those signs *do*, right? They convey what we believe. They show which candidate we support, which political ideology we align ourselves with. It's one of the ways that we practice and live out our citizenship.

So as we're talking about Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords who rules and reigns over heaven and earth, how do we show our support and allegiance for *Christ*? I don't see signs on every yard or corner for *that*. How do we practice and live out our citizenship in the Kingdom of God? That's one of the things this reading from Matthew is talking about.

Some background real quick. A lot of times when we talk about the Kingdom of God, we hear that as *heaven*. That the Kingdom of God is where we go after we die. And that's *part* of it. But the Kingdom of God is also present in the here and now. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is *at hand*, it has *come near*," and he teaches us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." The Kingdom of God is the state in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is the whole realm of God's rule and reign, in heaven and on earth, wherever God's will is done. So there is a sense in which God's kingdom is made real and manifest here on earth, in our lives, when God's will is done in us. And there is another sense in which we are always *waiting* for God's kingdom to come in its fullness when Christ comes again.

So what does it look like for us to live in the realm of God's rule; for God's will to be done *on earth, in us*? How do we serve Christ the King *here and now*?

Well, to understand how we serve Christ the King *here and now*, we look at what Matthew says about God’s kingdom at the end. It says that when Christ comes in 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. New Testament scholar Thomas Stegman says that “in Palestine at [the time of Jesus], shepherds routinely had mixed flocks. At night, they separated the sheep from the goats. Sheep enjoyed the open air of the pasture, while goats had to be protected from the cold. Because sheep had more commercial value, they were preferred over goats.”¹ As they are separated, the sheep are placed at the right hand of Christ, while the goats are placed at the left. In ancient culture, the right hand was the hand of honor. If you were seated at someone’s right hand, that was the place of honor (like the Apostles’ Creed says that Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father). So sheep are more valuable than goats, and they are given the place of honor in God’s kingdom because of what they *produce*.

Now, obviously he’s not just talking about literal sheep and goats here. He’s talking about *people*. So we have to translate this to *us*. And there’s a part of this that can be hard for us to hear because it doesn’t fit with our theology, with our understandings of God. Jesus says, “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...you believed in me and placed your faith in me.’” Right? Salvation comes by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, *not* through our works or what we *do*. It’s not a matter of *earning* or *achieving* our way into God’s eternal kingdom. It’s not about what we *produce*. It is about God blessing us with that which we have *not* earned and *do not* deserve. *That is grace*.

¹ Thomas Stegman in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ), pg. 333.

But what Jesus says here is, “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.” Why are they blessed by God; why do they get to inherit God’s kingdom? Because of what they have *done*. Because their *actions* have proved them *worthy*. Because of what they *produce*. This doesn’t sound like good Protestant theology of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. For a lot of us, if we really think about it, this is an *unexpected* response from Jesus.

And it was unexpected in his *story*, too. The righteous sheep hear this and say, “What?! When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” You see, they weren’t *trying* to earn favor with God. They weren’t helping people – *loving* people – because they thought, “This might be Jesus in disguise, so I’d better be on my best behavior!” They were caring for the hungry and the sick and the hurting because *it was the right thing to do*. Because *that’s what love does*. It cares, not just for the *greatest* and most *powerful* among us, but for the *least*, for those who are *most in need*.

This is not a matter of *earning* our way into God’s kingdom through our good works, because the people in this story weren’t even trying to do that. Rather, they were so filled with love for God and for their neighbor, that it just naturally flowed forth from them in acts of care and kindness. Their good works were *proof* of their salvation, evidence that they were *already living* in the Kingdom of God, that God’s will was being done *in* them and *through* them. It’s like the saying

that we aren't *saved* because of what we *do*; we do what we do *because* we are saved, because we have experienced the grace of God through Jesus Christ and we want to extend that same grace and love to others.

You see, *that* is how we serve Christ the King – not by serving or loving power or the powerful, but by serving and loving the weak, the poor, the oppressed, those who are hurting and hungry and broken and alone and *in need*, the *least* among us. The prophet Isaiah says, “Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon” (Isaiah 58:10). By serving the least among us (those who *society* views as the least among us), we are drawn away from the temptation to power and pride, and we are drawn closer to Christ Jesus who spent his life standing in solidarity with the poor, the broken, and the oppressed. If we want to be close to Christ, we have to be close to them.

The goats, those at his left hand, were cast away because they *ignored* the hungry and the sick and the poor and the hurting and the lonely. They did not *care* for them or actively *love* them. Their lives did not bear the fruit of their beliefs. It's so easy to focus on *ourselves*, on our needs and desires. How can we avoid being like them? There's a prayer that is attributed to Mother

Teresa:

Lord, when I am hungry,
send me someone to feed;
when I am thirsty,
send me someone who needs a drink;
when I am cold,
send me someone to warm;
when I am sad,
send me someone to cheer;
when my cross becomes heavy,
let me share another's cross;
when I am poor,
guide me to someone in need;

when I have no time,
send me someone I can help for a few moments;
when I am humiliated,
send me someone to praise;
when I am discouraged,
send me someone to encourage;
when I need understanding,
send me someone who needs mine;
when I need to be looked after,
send me someone to care for;
when I think only of myself,
draw my thoughts to another person.

It's about so trusting that God will take care of our needs that we don't have to *look* to our own needs. We can look to the needs of *others*. Pastor John Buchanan writes that "God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, by persuading us to forget about ourselves and worry about others."² I mean, that's what the Christian life is all about – dying to self, loving *God*, loving *neighbor*, and finding new life in Christ.

Buchanan goes on to say that "God...is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. Jesus said God is *here*, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. God is here, particularly in your neighbor, the one who needs you. You want to see the face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the children."³ This is how we serve Christ the King. By serving those in need. By loving those in whom we see Christ's face...and those in whom we *don't*.

We don't have to wait until "the end" to inherit the Kingdom of God. We can live in it *here* and *now* when God's will is done *in* us and *through* us. And what Jesus tells us is that God's will

² John M. Buchanan in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ), pg. 336.

³ *Ibid.*, 334.

involves loving and caring for those in need; small, simple acts of mercy and compassion for the least of these our brothers and sisters. Through this we make manifest the grace of God and the salvation that we have experienced, and we bear witness to the rule and reign of Christ the King in this world and in our lives. Let us pray...