

Ephesians 1:15-23 ~ Matthew 25:31-46

When Did We See You?

November 26, 2017 Christ the King/Reign of Christ

INTRODUCTION TO TEXT

Our gospel text this morning, Matthew 25:31-46 is not a parable, but rather it is an *apocalyptic drama*. What's the difference? Parables, are multi-layered stories that teach by starting with something familiar, "Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom," or "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers." And then they modulate to something surprising, larger, less familiar, where the bottom drops out and we are challenged by the larger implications and less concrete calls to action. Today's text is an *apocalyptic drama* because it begins "out there" in the otherworldly realm—in our case the Son of Man, the Shepherd King on his throne at the end of time, the imagined apocalypse--but then it modulates quickly and uncomfortably close--into the concrete and familiar, hunger, thirst, sickness, with unsettling clarity.

Let us listen now to Jesus' concluding apocalyptic drama that follows the three parables told in response to the question about when the Temple would be destroyed and the end would come. Here, the end has come, the protagonist has already returned and is sitting on his throne. Game over. Or not?

SERMON

You had me at this text. Honestly, one of the ways I heard the Holy Spirit drawing me to you, calling me to be your pastor was the statement right on your homepage: "scriptures that shape our ministry," and there it was: "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." How cool is that? But do they really mean it? And yes, now that I am here, I believe you do.

Your PNC was clear, in its Spirit and its conversation. From the statement of welcome on the homepage, to the signs here in the Narthex, to our newer lawn sign, "We Choose Welcome." We are a church that has heard Jesus' call to welcome the stranger, and to practice compassion for "least of these." Since starting here on November 1st, I've learned so much more about the ways this scripture has shaped us. Soup or Socks, that feeds and clothes those who are hungry and in need of clothing right here in our community; then my first week, the "Keep Kids Warm" distribution of coats and hats and mittens; our longstanding and deep commitment to Habitat for Humanity, and most recently our Immigration Task Force, seeking how the Holy Spirit is leading us to reach out to refugees and immigrants in our midst. These are just a few examples that say to me, "yes" we are letting this scripture shape us, our ministry--yes, the Body of Christ we call First Pres.

Today, on Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday, it has appeared as our gospel lectionary text, on our last Sunday in Year A. It is the climax, the apex in the

cycle of texts that begin with the birth of Christ. It only comes up once every three years: and this is our day with it. Here on the Sunday before we begin back at the start of our story, the First Sunday of Advent. The question, the challenge before us is this: What can this familiar text teach us today, in the brilliant light of Christ the King Sunday, and in the context of this brand new chapter of our ministry together as a church in almost 2018?

How can the notion of “King” and “throne” come anywhere close to our real lives here in the USA, where our most immediate association with kings and thrones may be the show “Game of Thrones,” or the Netflix series titled, “Reign” a show that ever so loosely tells the tragic tale about Mary Queen of Scots.

Of course Jesus is completely unlike any human king: born in a stable to a humble family, no palace or throne or physical home, for that matter. For his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he rode on a donkey, not a stallion. He was executed publicly on a cross with common criminals on either side, with a crown of thorns, piercing his skull, after being mocked and bullied and abandoned by even his best friends. What kind of a king is that? His power comes not from this world, but from the Creator of the Universe, the one who raised this Jesus from the dead, after we did our best to destroy him. This King who gives us the choice to follow or to ignore the Rule of Love, the call to Love God and Neighbor. It is up to us.

As overwhelming and even confusing the Reign of Christ may seem, one thing is clear: Our Lord and Savior, our King of Kings, our Judge did not remain distant or neutral. Our God chose to become one of us, so that we might see what Divine Love looks like in human form. But do we see it? What do we see when we face an individual or a group of people who are “the least of these”? What is our first response? And what do we do next?

We cannot control our first, gut response to people or a situation we come upon where Christ is calling to us through them to act with compassion. Not only may Jesus be the farthest thing from our minds, honestly we may think something like, “thank God that’s not me.” Or, “why do they act that way?” Or, “What is wrong with these people?” Pick your favorite group of people on the margins whom you find easy to hate or impossible to understand. Got it? Now hear the words of Victor Frankl, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor, who wrote “Between stimulus and response lies a space. In that space lie our freedom and power to choose a response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.” I would add, in that response lies our call to discipleship; our decision to be a sheep or a goat among the flock of our Shepherd king. 1. Will we respond to the call to see Christ, in the one or the group who have been displaced, dispossessed, or distressed. And 2: Then what will we do?

As we likely are already aware: this drama is all about what we do. It doesn’t seem to matter what we believe at all. There is no test of orthodoxy apart from behavior: how beliefs translate into action. It’s all about what we do or what we

don't do. That's the scary part for me. The judgment comes strictly by what these folks have actually done. Not what they intended to do. Not what they formed a committee to discuss and write a policy about. It's what they actually did. And what they ignored, dismissed, or were blind to. Scary stuff.

You want access to this king? You want to be a part of his entourage? This story, confounding in some ways, is absolutely clear in others. There is no middle ground, there is no neutral position. Everyone in this story is either a sheep or a goat; either blessed by God to inherit the kingdom, or cursed into eternal fire of damnation. The blessed ones are those who have chosen love, who have chosen welcome, chosen to embrace the "least of these." They have somehow been able to see past the differences, past the awkwardness of being in company with folks who may look and smell and act differently than they do. They also seem to be so dialed into this behavior, they did not even see their actions as special or different. It's just who they were.

Somehow, they were able to access the knowledge, the heart of compassion that goes deep, under the surface and sees that, "Yes, they are members of our family. The human family. And because we are related we cannot ignore or dismiss them. On top of that mind blowing reality, Christ is somehow vividly and profoundly present in the "the least of these" who are members of my family and not as much in the "most of these" who are also members of my family.

What will we, what do **we** do in that space between stimulus and response In this drama, there is no neutral, did you notice? Everyone is judged as either a sheep or a goat. There is no middle ground. No safe, middle position. I confess I like middle ground. But I think that comes from my position of privilege as white, North American product of a lovingly functional middle class family all of which I was simply born into.

What do others, from other countries and situations say about being neutral? South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu says this: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Elie Wiesel, Jewish writer, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor says it this way: "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." Bringing that a little closer, think for a moment, when have you been silent when a racist or homophobic joke or statement presented itself? I know I have. This text calls me to do better.

One more voice, a Christian German pastor's confession after World War II, "They came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I was not a Jew." ⁱFinally, this from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, "The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.... [an individual] who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it." When and how will we speak up here and now? The goats are the ones who say and do nothing in the face of evil and suffering.

It is hard to know what to do sometimes: as individuals and as a church. But Jesus is calling us to task. If the love of Christ is to reign supreme on this earth, it is up to us to be the hands and feet, of Christ. When we see someone in pain, or someone being teased or bullied, what do we do? On the systemic scale, what about advocating for adequate food and clean water, decent health care, humane immigration policies, and prison systems? Our gospel mandate here is clear: we cannot remain neutral about these issues and hope to be among the sheep on Jesus' right hand.

If this sounds overwhelming, it is. That's why God put us together into a church, to listen to one another, to ask the right questions, and do what we can. What we cannot do, is remain neutral. I want to close with a story written by George Lakey, a Quaker, who lived this challenge, one hot night on his own front porch. He writes,

"It was a hot night at my house in West Philadelphia. The windows were open, in order to catch any random breeze that might come by. Just as I was preparing for bed, I heard a loud shout from across the street: "Get off me, get off me! Stop that! Stop that!" So I ran to the window and looked out. Our street is not full of streetlights, and I was having trouble seeing, but I heard that the voice was coming from across the street.

So I yelled to a housemate, "Call 911!" and ran down the stairs to the door and out onto the porch—without a plan. I thought, well, at least let me get to the edge of the porch so I can see what's going on. From the edge of the porch I saw a couple across the street; the guy was beating on the woman, and she was screaming. It looks like a time for Superman. But what we've got is me. I'm the only one I see on a porch on my block. So I decide to be cautious because I can't tell whether there's a weapon involved, and in my city there often is. So I came to the edge of the porch and opened my mouth and took a deep breath, confident that something useful would come out of it, and I said, "I'M WATCHING YOU!"

I felt so foolish. The couple on the other side of the street stopped in action and looked across. There they saw this big, white guy on the porch, yelling something, and then they just got back into it. So I thought, *George, that was really stupid. But on the other hand, you're not dead yet, and they're still at it. So get closer, get closer.* So I went down the steps of my porch and went hallway to the sidewalk, heart thumping. *But I thought, look, I've studied Gandhi; I've read George Fox. I know what to do, so take a deep breath.* "I'M STILL WATCHING YOU!" So embarrassing! But across the street, they were really losing some of their energy because this big, white guy who had been safely on the porch was now closer to them.

Anyway, they're looking at me, and then, somewhat slowly, they get back into it. And I'm thinking, All right George, you're not dead yet; get closer. So I walk right to the edge of the sidewalk, another six feet closer, and I think, practice makes perfect, right? You have a few throwaways that don't work, and then you'll come up

with something really eloquent that someday you'll want to tell somebody about. So I broaden my stance, because I heard that helps, and I take another deep breath, and I say, "I'm still watching you!" And at this point they really don't know what to make of this, nor do I. But I notice that I'm not dead yet. There's no traffic at all; it's late at night.

By now there are some neighbors out on porches because I've been very loud. And they're not used to George yelling, "I'm watching you!" So they're wondering what George is watching. That's good. And I think, I'm not dead yet, I take another few steps. So I walk right to the middle of the street. At that point I stop, and I see an elderly African American woman walking with enormous dignity toward this couple of color. She takes the young woman by the arm and starts leading her away from the man, tossing a comment over her shoulder to him: "We don't treat our women that way." And she proceeds on down the street.

That when I got it. I was a place marker, and then the angel appeared to actually take care of it. Letting go with no guarantees. Just doing something." He realized after the moment of putting himself out there, seeing Christ in the woman being attacked, being Christ simply with his physical presence and simple words, "I'm watching you." He became in that instance a place marker, being one small, but pivotal part of an unfolding reality.ⁱⁱ

Do you want to be a part of that unfolding reality? Our king calls us to think on our feet, to talk with our bodies and hands, whatever we can think of to stand on the side of Christ, the side of Divine Love. If we are Christ followers, listening to the Gospel message, we cannot remain neutral. God is watching us. What are we doing? What more can we be doing? These are the right questions, as we open our eyes to see Jesus and to let this scripture continue to shape and transform us. Step by step.

ⁱPastor Martin Niemoller, *Celtic Daily Prayer, Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* (Harper One, New York, NY, 2002) p.559.

ⁱⁱ George Lakey, "On the Value of Conflict", *Friends Journal*, November, 2010, pp.8-9,