

Today is Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. Next week we'll start the season of Advent, when we wait, long, and listen for the coming of our Lord. But today we pause to reflect on the meaning of Christ's reign here and now over the Church, the world, and our lives. "What kind of king is Jesus? What does it look like to live and thrive under his reign" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net)? God's kingdom does not function like a typical kingdom. Jesus is in fact a different kind of king, more often found with those who society looks down upon. Christ's reign has broken into this world and is good news- especially to those on the fringes of society. Today in Matthew's Gospel, we find a familiar story to some that offers a few snapshots of what it's like in the kingdom of God. Snapshots of a "royalty that stoops" (Fleming Rutledge): a humble king, not a version of kingship that is all about domination, supremacy, triumphalism, and greatness. The portrait of Christ as King is a fearsome one in this text. Here in Matthew's Gospel is the last judgment scene, the parable of the sheep and the goats. It is the New Testament's only depiction of the great, final judgment. After the opening dramatic scene, Jesus teaches his followers what constitutes proper behavior as they await his return in glory. Here Matthew draws on the imagery from the prophet Daniel (7:13-14) to set forth the full manifestation of God's reign. Before listening to God's Word for us this day, first let us pray. **PRAY.** From the Gospel of Matthew 25:31-46. Let us open our ears to God's Word. **READ.**

The scene opens with a vivid description of the Son of Man's coming in glory, accompanied by angels, seated on his throne. We're told that all the nations will be gathered before him. But who are the nations? There are debates among

scholars as to who the nations are. Basically there are two camps of thought: 1) the nations are the Gentiles (meaning not the Jews or Christians) or 2) the nations are everyone-the whole human race. This latter option is what most scholars support. From the throne, Jesus, the king uses his authority to separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep are to be at his right hand and the goats at his left. We aren't told why the right and the left-maybe that's just how he separated them? One group, the sheep, are called righteous and are given eternal life while the other group, the goats, are sent away into eternal punishment. The criteria for the final judgment? For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you visited me (vv. 35-36). Certainly this list wasn't meant to be exhaustive. These acts of compassion all have a common denominator: all exhibit practical expressions of loving concern. Maybe we could include any act of compassion that leaves another person feeling seen, valued, heard, and loved?

Jesus calls the sheep, those who are "blessed by my Father" (v. 34). In Christ's kingdom, the blessed ones are those who do not retaliate with violence, but bear witness to a new kingdom...by serving others. The blessed ones have shown their faithfulness to the king by demonstrating acts of compassion, mercy, and love. On the other hand, those who lack merciful care for "the least of these," the goats, have neglected Jesus. They have not lived as Jesus and therefore have not displayed who the real King is. We have all been at times among both the sheep and the goats. We have been attentive or deaf to human cries around us, aware or blind to those in desperate need. Notice...both the sheep and the goats are all

ignorant asking, "Lord, when did we see you?" Neither the sheep nor the goats were out looking for Jesus, nor did they know Jesus when he stood before them. The king answers them, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (v. 45). Who are "the least of these?" Again, there are two main camps of thought among scholars. Some believe that "the least of these" are the persecuted Christians. Others believe that Jesus is referring to anyone in desperate need- not just Christians. Most scholars land with "the least of these" being any who are in desperate need. The sheep were surprised to realize they had cared for the King of creation; evidently, they simply shared who they were and what they had freely, without calculation or expectation. Mother Teresa became well known for speaking about "the Gospel on five fingers." With her ever luminous smile, she would hold up her hand and count off each word with a finger: "You. Did. It. To. Me. It can seem like a radical oversimplification of the Christian faith, but the saint, with her graced wisdom, lived her life by this parable of the sheep and the goats. This was her mission statement. Mother Teresa said, 'God's ways are so beautiful- we have God almighty who stoops so low as to love you and me and make use of us and make us feel that He really needs us'" (Scott G. Hefelfinger, faithandculture.com). When, for Christ's sake, we love and serve those in need- the unseen, the unloved, the unclaimed- we become instruments of his love in the world. While the instruction may sound simple, living it out can be difficult. And perhaps just as difficult is that we don't get to decide who is a sheep and who is a goat. That's God's job, and the Judge who sits on the throne surprises because God's judgments are unlike ours.

Years ago when I was a campus minister in TN, I had a group of students who participated in Room in the Inn. RITI is a wonderful ministry in Nashville, much like IHN here with United Ministries. One particular Monday morning, I took the 5 am group downtown so that they could get to work and when I pulled up to the building, a woman approached me (but not the men riding with me) and asked if I had any food. I had no food with me and told her so but told her I'd try and bring her something to eat when I dropped off the second group. When we got back to campus things got busy, and we hurriedly gathered the guys into two vans and made our way back downtown. One of the men asked those of us in the van, "If you see someone hungry today, what are you going to do?" He sounded like a preacher on a Sunday morning. I said aloud, "Oh no! I forgot to grab some food for that woman!" Immediately the man who had asked the question said, "Don't worry, Pastor. I'll give her some of my food. Isn't that what Jesus calls us to do?" Enough said. Despite my misgivings, this follower of Jesus surprised and reminded me that even those who are experiencing homelessness, who sometimes are often the most hungry, are also responsible for feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger.

Here in Matthew's Gospel, we're told that these acts of compassion are what life in Christ, life in God's kingdom, looks like. We're also told how we will be judged in the final days. Notice that there is no mention of belief or doctrine here. There is not a word in this passage about theology or creeds. There is only one criterion for judgment which is "whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name" (*FOW*, John M. Buchanan). In other words, "the criterion for judgment is not one's

confession but the mercy we have lived” (Dick G. Lange, workingpreacher.org). The criteria will be compassion and compassion alone. Surprised? “But yes, this is our king, and yes, we are meant to be provoked and bewildered by his priorities” (Thomas). Feeding. Clothing. Welcoming. Tending. Visiting. These are the markers of God’s reign. These are the traits we exhibit in the world when we follow Jesus Christ. It is no coincidence that Jesus, who declared that he “came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28), demands that service be rendered to those in need. It’s because of God’s love for us that we’re able to respond faithfully in loving service to others. If we had one specific scripture that spoke to our mission here at Triune, it would be this one, as this scripture is a call to be in relationship with the those in need. Our mission here is “to share Christ’s love by meeting physical needs and providing life-changing opportunities to the disadvantaged.”

As God calls us to continue and live out our mission, I hope we continue to go deeper in relationship with those in need. Because while charity meets immediate needs, it does not solve the root causes. Some charity can actually cause harm as taught in books such as *Toxic Charity* and *When Helping Hurts*. I pray that we continue to be attuned to people’s real needs. As I was reminded when several of our parishioners, Beverly, Lawton, and Alton, received housing in the last two weeks, relationships take time- years- to build. “Because to truly get food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, health to the sick, and hope to the prisoner, what is universally called for is help in the form of listening, respect, and relationship” (Anthony J. Tang, *A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Series*). In order to get to the root cause, there are

many obstacles to be overcome. I hope that we can continue to listen to others about their lives and challenges. May we continue to build relationships. May we find creative ways, with God's help, to build more permanent supportive and affordable housing, as the SEARCHlight group headed by Jim and Peg Carroll and others in conjunction with United Housing Connections and other partners have helped to do with the Church St. Place at Poe Mill. As we serve, may we see the face of Christ in those in need, who are people, too, loved and created by God. For what we begin to discover in time is that those in need also have hopes, dreams, fears, and even justifications that resemble our own.

"It's not that we earn our way to majestic King Jesus by caring for the vulnerable. It is that majestic King Jesus, by his own choice and volition, has stooped and surrendered in such a way that he IS the vulnerable. There's no other way to get to him. Period. Not if we take Jesus' kingship seriously" (Thomas). While everyone has had moments of being both goats on the left and sheep on the right, the good news is that over and over again God places people in our lives to give us new opportunities to serve Christ in acts of loving care. Let's ask God for the grace today to see and treat others with the eyes and heart of King Jesus. And see what happens in the kingdom of God. Amen.