

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Christ the King Sunday on 11/26/2023,  
based on Matthew 25:31-46 – The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

“When you care for the least among us, you care for Jesus himself”

Our Gospel reminds me of a song sung by Joan Osborne called “One of Us.”

What if God was one of us?

Just a slob like one of us

Just a stranger on the bus

Tryin' to make his way home?

God is one of us, of course in Jesus' incarnation, but also in the faces of those who are hurting or in need. In Matthew 25:40, Jesus proclaims, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Who are the least of these among us these today? Pause.

Did you notice that in the Gospel, Jesus is counting the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned as members of his family. This says nothing about just Christians. Jesus is talking the whole world as his family. The word nations found in verse 32, “when the Son of Man, Jesus will come again and gather all the nations”, in Greek can also be translated as Gentiles. So, anyone in need throughout the world, Jew or Gentile, insiders or outsiders, should be of concern to us Christians. That is why we should care about wars in places like Ukraine and Russia, or Israel/Palestine. Closer to home, if you walk in a room where someone is feeling lonely, or being left out, or bullied, or hurt in any way, you should step in or speak up or act because they are members of our family according to Jesus. And if you consider yourself in one of these categories, God is with you.

This is a judgement parable. It should make you feel a little uncomfortable. It should cause you to take an inventory of your life and wonder, am I counted among the sheep or goats? It is titled in the NRSV as “The Judgement of the Nations” where The Son of Man,

Jesus, will come and separate the Sheep from the Goats. The Sheep get to enter into the eternal kingdom of heaven prepared for them and the goats will enter the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

We all want to be counted among the sheep, right? The good news is in John's Gospel, Jesus is our Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. Even though we stray. Our faith and baptism count us among the sheep.

I find it comforting that those who were accounted as sheep in the parable didn't even know they were sheep. They were surprised in the final judgement. They questioned Jesus, "When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

They were confused. They didn't recall seeing Jesus when they cared for those in need. But that's the point. They were living out their faith without even thinking they could earn any reward for it. It was a natural outflow of their faith and the teachings of Christ. A faith that is active in love for the neighbor is the litmus test of a true faith in Christ. Being a Christian is never about me, myself, and I. It is always for the other.

As Lutheran Christians, we know that we can't earn our way into heaven. That we are justified by grace through faith, or put in a right standing with God, solely through Jesus' work on the cross and in the resurrection. After we say I believe, this parable is our job description that includes all other duties as assigned.

When we fill our food pantry at OSLC or collecting Christmas gifts for the Harbor house shelter we are living Matthew 25 out... but at an arm's length. Taking it a step further, sitting down and hearing these people's stories would provide an even deeper encounter with Christ. It could change the trajectory of your life like it did mine.

In closing, I remember when I visited the Holy Land in January of 2000, we met with Father Elias Chacour in the Galilean village of

Ibillin. He is a Melkite Catholic Priest who started a school for Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the same school. It was called the Mar Elias Education Institution. He believed that education and living in community with people who have great differences is the way to peace on the ground. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace prize a few times. We named our son, Elias, after him. But mostly, I remember him asking us pilgrims, after a huge pregnant pause at the beginning of his speech... "Did you find him?" In other words, Did you find Jesus as we travelled around to all the holy sites? Then he said, "The tomb is empty". You won't find him the dead stones... but in the living stones... the people. I finally figured out what he meant. It was Matthew 25 stuff. I finally encountered Christ in the Holy Land when half of our group got to go into Gaza to meet with a group of High School Girls learning English. They had hopes and dreams just like us. They wanted to go on to college and get out of Gaza. But with the border restrictions of the Israeli Government most of these girls would never leave Gaza. That's when it clicked. I met Jesus in the face of these Muslim teenagers who faced systemic barriers to an education and future because of who they are and where they live.

May you see Jesus in the face of everyone you meet. Everyone has a story. Everyone is hurting in some way. May we have ears to hear and eyes to see Christ among us. And may others see Christ in you.

And may we sheep feel Christ's presence today as we gather in His name, and share a simple meal of bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. Amen!