

Proper 29, Yr. A: Christ the King
Nov. 20, 2005
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Many of Jesus' parables are a bit puzzling with their many layers of interpretation. Today's gospel, however, is probably one of the most direct parables Jesus ever spoke. But it is typically not one of the most favorite. That's probably because when we hear that God will judge us according to how we respond to human need, we immediately do a sort of moral inventory, and we usually feel that we come up short. In these days when human need and suffering are everywhere from Pakistan to New Orleans, and we are besieged by requests for aid, many of us experience donor fatigue. We can easily feel overwhelmed by the immensity of anguish across the globe and we become paralyzed and don't know what we can do to help.

And today we hear Jesus saying to us, "Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters who are members of my family, you do to me." Very easy to understand, right?

I'm reminded of a saying of Mark Twain, "It's not those parts of the bible that I do not understand that bother me. It's the parts of the Bible that I do understand that bother me the most." For me, today's gospel is one such passage.

There's nothing complicated about today's gospel. We are given a clear picture of the final judgment, when we are all held accountable for our actions. And for some, it's not a pretty picture. The righteous are invited to share in the heavenly realm of eternal life, while the unrighteous are sent into the eternal fire of punishment.

It's easy to hear in this a somewhat frightening look at what awaits us. But let me tell you, there is a lot more to this gospel than that. Beyond the image of a judgmental and wrathful God is an invitation to deepen our understanding of the true meaning of our lives.

We hear it often enough: our world assaults us with voices declaring that the way to success and prosperity is through wealth or education or physical appearance. But we know that the way of Jesus is not the way of the world. That's why we're here today. We want our lives to reflect something different, something eternally purposeful and personally satisfying.

And in today's gospel, we find out exactly what it is God wants for our lives. More than anything else, more than all the knowledge we have gathered, more than all the status we have acquired, more than all the doctrine we have studied, God wants to make us compassionate people. God wants to create in us hearts that "respect the dignity of every human being."

God's judgment, AND our own fulfillment, depend on one thing: how we care for one another; and most particularly, how we care for those in deepest need. And the care we are called to give is in the simplest things: Giving a hungry person a meal, welcoming a stranger, comforting the sick. It is in these simplest acts, within easy reach of us all, that we are to show Christ's love.

But that's not all there is to it. Just what makes this kind of caring so profoundly significant, and here is the real crux of the matter, is that it brings us into relationship with Christ himself. We not only care for the stranger because Christ tells us too. We care for the stranger because it is IN the stranger that we encounter Christ. Jesus is the hungry. Jesus is the lonely. Jesus is the poor. When we expect to meet Christ, it is Christ we will find.

Just think of it. Think of all the opportunities we have then to encounter the living Christ. This is the invitation to us today: to seek and find God not only in the obvious places, like in the beauty of a sunset over Long Island Sound, or in the face of a sleeping child. We find God also in the faces and places where people are suffering. In the faces and places we often turn away from and those we judge as being the least Christ like.

What does it mean to find Christ in the suffering? How do we do this?

It means **above all** that Christ loves lives inside of us. It means we have opened ourselves to relationship with Christ in our hearts and minds and we are committed to following him. It starts within us, and moves out.

And then it means we begin at home, in the smallest acts of mercy we do day after day in caring for a spouse or a child or a parent. By doing these things with awareness, expecting to see Christ, we will find our compassion and love deepening.

We don't have to go to Asia or Africa to find the suffering. We need go no further than our own kitchens or classrooms or book groups. And we practice. We practice seeing Christ when we drive carpool. We practice seeing Christ when we hold the door for someone to pass through. We practice seeing Christ when we give our money to the counter staff at Dunkin Donuts. *Every encounter, every act,* is an opportunity to connect with Christ, an opportunity for us to grow deeper into relationship with Christ.

And as we practice and practice, the quality of Christ's love deepens in us and spreads wider and wider. It spreads from our homes to our neighbors. It spreads to the man down the street who had a stroke. It spreads to the woman alone in the nursing home. It spreads to the child with autism and the friend with depression. It spreads to the person here this morning who is perhaps sitting near you. Someone you've met briefly and who has a story to tell.

Then Christ's love continues to spread, and you realize that it's ***your*** sisters and brothers, ***your*** family, who are suffering all over the world. Your sister is starving. Your brother is dying from AIDS. Your aunt is homeless. And so you reach out to them. You reach out not because you should, but because you long to meet Christ and because Christ's love flows from you.

And the ways we reach out differ from person to person: some of us may reach out by committing to daily prayer; some by sending money or working to change public policy or contacting our congressperson or endeavoring to be informed. The point is not to be burdened by a duty to respond but to be open to the multitude of ways we meet Christ in the world. What we do because we have to or because we're expected to is not enough. Jesus' words to us are about all those things we do that flow from us from our deepest, truest identity as Christians.

That's the real lesson for us today. It's not about how many outreach activities we have done. It is about how we respond to the invitation to seek and to find God: at all times, in all places, and in all faces. It is all about our actions being the natural consequence of a life centered in Christ and lived by the rule of love.

In the end, there is one standard that decides eternal blessing or eternal punishment. And it's not what we say we believe or how eloquently or often we pray or whether we read the bible everyday. Those things matter for other reasons. There is one standard in the parable of the last judgment and it's a simple question: Where is Christ's compassion visible in your life? *Amen*