

Do We Recognize This King?

Matthew 25:31-46

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Christ the King Sunday

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Matthew 25:31-46: ³¹ ‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “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.” ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Today marks the end of the liturgical church year; it's our New Year's Eve, except without Dick Clark. The season of Advent starts next week and our church rhythms will begin again: preparing for the birth of Jesus, and cycling back through Christ's life, death and resurrection. On the church calendar, today is an ending that also marks a beginning. Our gospel reading this morning, also speaks to an ending, a big one. The ending of our earthly lives and our final judgment. It's a formidable passage, and fodder for a good fire and brimstone sermon, if I were inclined to go in that direction. This is where the rubber meets the road, where we find out if our living ends in eternal life, or, YIKES, eternal punishment. This is no soft-pitch for a holiday weekend! And yet, in it there is grace.

The scene opens in a grand way. We find the Son of Man seated on his throne, surrounded by glory, with angels by his side. This is big-king imagery, right up there with the throne images described in the Book of Revelation (Chapter 4). As the field of vision expands, we see *all the nations* gathered before the King. We can conclude that Jews and Gentiles alike are at the feet of Jesus; both believers and non-believers. We can imagine all skin colors, countries, cities, and faith traditions represented. Yet they seem to be indistinguishable until their judgment. All will be judged the same; at the same time, by the same criteria. The Son of Man begins separating them, the "sheep from the goats," or the blessed from the accursed, with the righteous inheriting the kingdom and the others, eternal punishment. The process of this sorting is very clear – you either attended to the vulnerable or you didn't.

This aspect of the final judgment should not come as a surprise. Following Jesus means to imitate his ways, attending to people in need and

welcoming the stranger. The surprise here is not that serving others would be criteria for final judgment, the surprise in this passage is that *everyone* is surprised! The caption for this scene might as well be, "Wait, what?!?" Because among those who cared for the needs of their neighbor, and those who ignored them, *no one* recognized Jesus. "When was it that we did, or didn't, feed you, clothe you, or visit you?" they ask. This text makes it very clear that we will be judged on our care of those in need among us. But what do we make of the fact that no one recognized Jesus among the hungry, naked, and imprisoned? They were all surprised that Jesus was among the likes of the "least of these," as Jesus labels them. As we think about our own core practice of CONNECT, we might say that Jesus is found among those with whom we might feel the *least* connected; that's where Jesus is hanging out.

Would we too be surprised to find Jesus among the least of these? Who are the people we feel least connected to in our 21st century, North American context? If we sat down to make a list, we might find the list to be pretty expansive. The person with whom I disagree, the one who takes too much of my time, the person of the other political party or religious practice? With whom are you least connected? Perhaps it's even a family member, or just someone you confront every day who annoys you. We have lots of opportunity to connect here at First Pres; perhaps there are those among us with whom you are least likely to connect. But what about those outside our walls? What about our neighbors? What is the brokenness there in which Jesus is residing?

This lesson makes me wonder, are we missing Jesus in our own midst because he's in places we don't expect to find him? Or places we just don't go?

And what are the implications of that? Can we really be a follower of Jesus if we don't know where he goes, or don't recognize him when we get there?

I remember being in a Bible study years ago with a friend who was beginning to recognize how radical Jesus was for his time. After several weeks of seeing the unexpected ways of Jesus, she finally said, "I'm pretty sure Jesus is going to come back as someone preaching on a street corner downtown and I'm going to walk right by him thinking he's some kind of a nut." Ha! Me too. How do we follow and imitate someone we're walking right by?

Jesus promised he would be with us *always*, but I'm not sure today we recognize him any better today than the folks in our gospel lesson. We pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come" but maybe Jesus is already there. According to Matthew's gospel, he is. As Jesus was prepping his disciples for their first good-news tour, he reminded them that "the kingdom of God has come near" (10:7). Later, as he parted from his followers, he also assured them saying, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20). The King and the Kingdom are already among us. This passage shows us how easy it is not to notice. But the implication of not recognizing Jesus, is that we are missing opportunities for transformation that only occur in an encounter with the living Christ. This passage, rather than an ominous threat-of-damnation lesson, might be an invitation into a deeper and transformative experience of relationship with Christ.

On this Christ the King Sunday, Matthew's text reminds us that this King is not the ruler we expect, found in expected places. This mighty King, described at the beginning of the passage as seated in glory on a throne, with angels by his side, is also found here and now in the people and places we

most easily overlook. In that is great grace, grace that gives us both direction and comfort as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Let's talk about the guidance we find here in our final judgment. First, it appears that our judgment will not be about rules, but instead about relationships. As churches begin to return to their core mission, they often find that we're all spending a considerable amount of time and effort on things that have little to do with the ministry of Jesus Christ. Outsiders to the church today might describe our ministries as maintaining structures and traditions and institutions, rather than ministries of relationship that resemble the life of Christ. We can only meet the needs of our neighbors if we know our neighbors well enough to know their needs. Within our walls, that means knowing each other beyond the level of pew-acquaintances. It also begs for relationships outside our walls. If we only seek to encounter Jesus at church, we risk missing him altogether. This final judgment tells us that whether we show up to church or not, whether we are professing Christians or not, our final judgment will include the question of whether or not we attended to the most vulnerable among us – the hungry, the thirsty, the exposed, the stranger. Did we lead a life of mercy that revealed the presence of God among the "least of these"?

This isn't just about the needy as we define it for charitable purposes. This is about caring for all people and all nations. For we all are at one time hungry and thirsty – hungry for meaning in our lives, for joy, to be loved; and thirsty for recognition and companionship. Inside and outside our doors are broken marriages, addictions, anger, pain and grief. Each of us is vulnerable at some time, the hungry and naked for sure, but also those waiting for the

results of tests, those without work, those living with uncertainty. Our guidance here is to follow Christ into places where Christ can be found, among the hurting and vulnerable. To be in relationship with those whom we typically would not be drawn to, and to welcome relationship from those whom we least expect. And this leads me to the comfort in this passage of dramatic judgment imagery.

We are judged by a King who is right there with us. Those places in which we often feel the absence of God is exactly where God shows up. This passage is certainly about acts of charity to our neighbor, but also about where we encounter God. It's an assurance that whatever our brokenness and need, we will find Christ there. That's where we find *this* King.

I love that this passage was assigned at this transition in our calendar. Our theme this year at First Pres is CONNECT, one of our five core practices. In the fall, as we were coming back together after the summer, we focused on CONNECT to one another. Kicking that theme off with a Festival Sunday, we gathered in one worship service and over one meal to nurture our relationships, to *connect*. While we continue to build relationships, our CONNECT theme shifts next week with the beginning of Advent. We will then shift to CONNECT with God. It is a fitting thread. We connect with God through relationships with each other, and in relationship with God. Jesus points out here in the judgment scene, that we will know Jesus in our acts of mercy toward those in need. And in those relationships of giving and receiving, Jesus will meet us.

As we begin to celebrate "God with us" in Advent, we celebrate that God is with us even in the most unexpected places - among the vulnerable, in a manger, among the oppressed, and on a cross. This is God with us wherever we are, including and especially in our place of deepest need. Our lesson serves as an invitation to experience the presence of God in deeper ways than ever before; to look for God in the needs around us and in our own need.

Will we recognize this King? The King who sits in all glory, and is also glorified in the overlooked places and people of our world? This King, whom we are invited to encounter today, is the same King that seeks us out, whether we recognize him or not. This Christ the King whom we worship, whose birth we will soon celebrate, reveals the lordship of a God who is the true shepherd, as we heard described today by the prophet Ezekiel (34:11-16). The King who will seek out the sheep, rescuing us, feeding us, providing us rest and resources, binding up our wounds and strengthening us in our weakness. This is the King who will go to every extent to save us, even to the cross. Into the presence of that King we are invited today. Let's go there. Together. And let's look for him in some unexpected places. Amen.