**“The Path Forward”**

Matthew 25:31-40 Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest November 21, 2021

 **Today is Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the Christian calendar year, when we celebrate the son of a carpenter as Lord of lords and King of kings. As the Risen Christ said to the Eleven on the mountain in Galilee, “*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:16).***

 **In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is concluding his public ministry in Jerusalem, on the eve of his trial and crucifixion. The scene is probably the Portico of Solomon in the Temple Court of the Gentiles, where Jesus came to teach each day. Matthew 25 captures the culmination of Jesus’ teaching in three Parables of Judgment: The Wise and Foolish Bridemaids; the Parable of the Talents; and the third teaching—the one about the sheep and the goats—which is not really a parable at all, but a description of a real and future judgment.**

 **During a memorable week when a jury of his peers has judged Kyle Rittenhouse not guilty on all counts of murder by reason of self-defense, and by so judging has put a spotlight once more on the deep divisions afflicting this nation, it seems to me a very wise thing for us to listen to this teaching from Jesus, and to reflect on the nature of the judgment of Christ.**

**I**

 **In this account of the Great or Final Judgment, all nations will be gathered before the throne of the Son of Man, the title that Jesus used most often to describe himself. This includes believers and non-believers alike. All humanity will stand before this King for judgment, and for some—a kingdom prepared for them *“From the foundation of the world.”***

**What is this kingdom? It is God’s kingdom, where, unlike our kingdoms, mercy triumphs over judgment. Commentator Dale Brunner writes about the kingdom this way:**

***“The future kingdom of God is not pie in the sky by and by, after the main meal of the world. The kingdom of God is the structure of reality. The so-called real world is ephemeral and messed-up. The most important questions of all are whether or not people make the decisions that bring them into God’s kingdom.”***

 **According to this text attributed to Jesus, the peoples of the world will be separated on the Day of Judgment on the basis of their actions—not on the basis of their knowledge, recognition or beliefs. What are these actions? They are common actions, humane actions, called by the Church *“The Six Works of Mercy:”***

* ***I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.***
* ***I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.***
* ***I was a stranger and you took me in.***
* ***I was without clothes and you clothed me.***
* ***I was sick and you visited me.***
* ***I was in prison and you came to see me.***

 **These things are common acts of mercy affecting everyone which you don’t have to be a Doctor of Theology to understand. You don’t need to be a miracle-worker, either. These actions are possible for all of us to do. Martin Luther said that in every home, a loving adult can and sometimes must perform all six works of mercy, including preparing food and drink; clothing, shelter and hospitality; and by caregiving and waiting upon the sick and confined. Over the past few weeks, I have learned from personal experience that Luther was right. And many of you know it, too, because you’ve done all of these acts of mercy as well—some of you for many years.**

**II**

 **People have asked me, *“If we are saved by grace through faith, how is it that these works of mercy will determine the outcome of our life?”* It’s a very good question. And the Bible’s answer is: *“They don’t.”* Jesus began his public ministry by saying, *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Mt. 5:7).* He ended his public ministry in exactly the same way. But as Brunner puts it, *“The merciful will get into the kingdom only because of Christ’s blood shed for them, not because of their mercy…just as believers will get into the kingdom on the basis of Christ’s work, not on the basis of the strength or weakness of their faith.”***

**The grace of Christ, you see, is actually demonstrated in how he stoops to meet us, and reveal himself to us, in the faces of the poor and needy, the unwanted and unloved. *“Here I am,”* he says. *“As you do it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.”* That is grace.**

 **It says in Romans 3:23, *“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we are justified by his grace as a gift…effective by faith.”* But as it says in James 2:26, *“Faith without works is dead.”*  So these simple acts of mercy, set forth by Jesus himself, may indeed, when according to Paul in Romans 2:15, when done from the heart, may *“perhaps excuse us…when God will judge the secret thoughts of all.”* So in other words, when the King of kings stands before us in the persons of those needing food, shelter or freedom, we will be blessed by our acts of mercy, and perhaps even justified—by love.**

 **This is what James 2:13 means when it says, “*Mercy triumphs over judgment.”* Because without mercy, we’re all going to wind up smelling more like goats than sheep.**

**IV**

 **Which brings us to the Path Forward, the heart of our stewardship message: the Path that Jesus walked before us for the sake of the joy of its destination.**

 **We are surely living in challenging times, where Christianity itself seems to be waning in America, as it already has in Europe. But our hope is not in Christianity. It is in Jesus, our Lord and King. *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).* He is our “sure and certain hope.”**

 **And this is why we will aspire to renew the face of this congregation by investing in raising up our children to know and love the Lord; by making life-long disciples who are compassionate, resilient and wise; by investing in technology to share and extend the Good News in the world we live in; and by embracing the call to be a Matthew 25 church in all the ways we can. We are doing many of these things now: with children’s and youth ministry; small group opportunities; live-streamed worship and wide-reaching mission support. But we can do more. And we will do more. That’s what this Path Forward is all about. Why do we do it? For the joy of serving others. As Jesus did it for the joy of saving us.**

**Conclusion**

 **I leave you with a story by Leo Tolstoy called *Where God Is, Love Is.***

 ***Martin the Cobbler worked hard all his life making and repairing boots and shoes for the people of his village. When first his wife and then his only son died of sickness, Martin became sad and bitter, and stopped going to church. He soon despaired even of living, until a pilgrim came by his shop one day with an old leather copy of the Gospels. “Can you repair this, Martin?” he said. “I will leave it with you…perhaps you might even read it now and then.”***

 ***Well, Martin began reading the Gospels, and over time, his outlook and behavior began to change. He drank less and laughed more, and took a greater interest in others. Then one night he had a dream…and in his dream, the Lord Jesus came and spoke to him. “Martin,” he said, “I am coming to your shop tomorrow. Be ready and watching for when I come.”***

 ***Early next morning, Martin was at his work-table in his basement shop, looking up through his small window at the busy street outside. An old man named Stepanovich came by to sweep the snow off the stoop. Martin thought he looked hungry and sick. He opened his door. “Come inside, Stepanovich,” he said, and he sat him down by his woodstove. “I will get you some bread to eat.” “May the good Lord bless you,” said Stepanovich. “I have eaten nothing for two days.” But Martin was watching the street outside.***

 ***A little while later, after Stepanovich had gone, Martin saw a mother and baby standing above him in the street. She was thin and poorly-dressed, and her baby was crying. He opened his door. “Come inside and be warm,” he said. The woman stepped inside his shop. She told Martin that her husband was a soldier. He had been called away eight months ago, and she had heard nothing since. She had tried to get a job as a wet-nurse, but the women said she was too thin. And yesterday, she had sold her cloak for sixpence to buy food. “Sit down by the stove,” he said, while heating up some cabbage soup. “Look in that old chest: there are some clothes in there that belonged to my wife and son.” The woman found garments for her baby, and a thick warm cloak for herself. “God bless you, sir, for your kindness to us,” she said as she left Martin’s shop. But Martin was watching the street outside.***

 ***Martin was still waiting for Jesus when the day began to wane. An apple-seller came by just as a little boy tried to steal an apple from her basket. She caught him by the neck and began to yell at him and shake him. Martin came out into the street. “Do not be harsh with him,” he said. “Yes—I saw him steal your apple, but I will pay for it. The Lord taught us to forgive those who sin against us.” And he began to tell her about what he had read from the pilgrim’s book, while the boy stood listening intently. “The boy has sinned against you, but we have greater sins of our own, do we not?” The woman was silent, and her face softened. The boy apologized for stealing the apple, and when the woman shouldered her basket to leave, he offered to carry it for her. The two walked off together, and the woman had forgotten to ask Martin for payment. But Martin was watching the street.***

 ***Now the end of the day arrived, and Martin was sad that the Lord had not come by to see him. That night, he went to bed disappointed. But then he had a dream…***

 ***In his dream, he heard the Lord calling from the darkness.
“Martin, is that you?” “Yes, Lord. Are you here, Lord?” And in his dream, he saw old Stepanovich step out of the darkness, smiling. “It is I,” he said, and turned away. Then Martin saw the mother and baby step out of the darkness, smiling. “It is I,” she said, and they turned away. Next, Martin saw the boy and the apple-seller step out of the darkness, smiling. “It is I,” they said, and turned away.***

 ***And suddenly, Martin knew that the Lord Jesus had come to visit him in his shop that day. For he remembered what was written in that old, tattered copy of the Gospels:***

***“As you did it unto the least of these…you did it unto me.”***