

Natalie W. Bell
November 26, 2023
Christ the King Sunday

The Least of These
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.
32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will *separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,*
33 and he will put the *sheep* at his **right** hand and the *goats* at the **left**.
34 Then 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;
35 for *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,
36 I was *naked* and you gave me clothing, I was *sick* and you took care of me, I was in *prison* and you visited me.'
37 Then 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?
38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?
39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"
40 And 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.*'
41 Then 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;
42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
43 I 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.'
44 Then 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?"
45 Then 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.*' **46** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

When have YOU encountered the least of these?

One winter day I was getting my two small kids into the minivan, ready to leave for church.

We got buckled in, and I was looking into the side rearview mirror when I saw her face.

The smiling face of an elderly woman, with a missing tooth,
messed up white hair, wearing a house robe.
I stopped backing up, so I wouldn't hit her.

I jumped out of the van....
and realized that she was likely suffering from some kind of dementia,
but she was smiling and happy, and trying to get into the minivan.
She couldn't tell me where she lived,
or where she was going, except to say 'with you!'

Thankfully, when I called the non-emergency police line,
they were happy to hear from us,
because her family had already called when she wandered away.
She lived in apartments down the street and around the corner,
so we just put her in the van and drove her home!

When have YOU encountered the least of these?

Recently I encountered a ***young woman*** living in her car nearby.
She has a job, just not enough to get an apartment yet.
Thankfully we've been helping her with various resources....

When have YOU encountered the least of these?

I never knew the term ***debtor's prison*** applied to anything modern
until a friend of the church called year ago, from the city jail,
asking if I would visit her.
She had unpaid debt, and on her meager salary was unable to pay.
So she was put in jail.

Most of the times that I have encountered someone sick, imprisoned, lost,
homeless, or in need---***I am totally surprised.***

I don't know why—I'm a pastor.

I see people in need all the time.

But I'm still surprised.

Maybe it's because we take our comfortable lives for granted--

We do, don't we?

We assume that we will have food on the table,
 a nice warm home, a job, a family or friends.....
 and then we meet people in the world, *with little or none of this!*

And Jesus says that he can be found, where?

In the lives of those in need.
 In their hearts, and faces.
 IN the least of these.

Did you know that our food pantry just served *120 families at Thanksgiving?*
 That's 120 families who live right here, near all of us.
 Isn't that astounding?

*The truth is, our Savior Jesus shows up in unexpected people and places.
 All the time.*

God has a preference for the needy---
 some call this God's preferential option for the poor.
 But it's also a preference for anyone in need.
All throughout scripture we read about God's people
 being urged to care for the widows, the orphans,
 the poor, the strangers, the immigrants.

This parable of the sheep and the goats is just another example.

But it is a parable. Jesus' final parable
 about 'being ready' for Christ's return at the end of time.

It's the *last story Jesus tells* before his passion, the last week of his life.
 So this story is especially powerful—
 because he is looking toward the end of his life,
 and sharing what is really close to his heart.

*Today is known as Christ the King Sunday,
 and this story is about Jesus our King—*

But he is a *different* kind of king,
 with a different kind of reign and a different kingdom,
 or kin-dom as we talked about in the last sermon series.
 This is a king who cares for the least, and invites us to participate in that kingdom.

The Feast of Christ the King was first established in the Roman Catholic Church in 1925 and was adopted by Protestants who follow the church calendar and observe the lectionary. This means it's a pretty late edition to the church calendar, most feast days were instituted centuries before this one.

In 1925, the world was a crazy place.

Mussolini was in the middle of his reign in Italy.

A young Adolf Hitler was causing a stir with his *Mein Kampf*, the world was experiencing the first stirrings of a "Great Depression."

It is in that world that the Church declared the need to end the year by remembering that Jesus Christ is Lord.

There are no other "lords" or "kings" above Him.

Preston Sharpe, *The Art of Preaching*, Christ the King.

Christ the King Sunday is the *end of our liturgical year* that started last Advent, and it *looks ahead to the beginning of the next year in the church*.

Next Sunday, December 3rd is the First Sunday of Advent—

And we'll start a whole new church year.

I wonder, what if we didn't wait until January to make New Year's resolutions?

What if we made a resolution, now, to take this story seriously?

To pay attention to the least of these?

What if we committed to looking for those who need us?

To serve Jesus, today?

Not just when it's convenient, or easy, or understandable.

Not just when it's people we like, or those that are easy to love?

But when it's *difficult*.

When it *interrupts* our daily lives.

When it's people *we don't like, or don't understand,*

or can't believe we're called to love.

You know, how we live matters, doesn't it?

That's what this story is saying.

It matters a lot.

To us, to others, to God.

Mark Twain once said, *“It’s not what I DON’T understand about the Bible that bothers me. It’s what I DO understand”*.

Isn’t that the truth?

This passage today is one of those stories.

It’s simple and straightforward.

Serve the least of these, because that’s where we find Jesus.

That is the *criteria* for living as Christ followers.

But talk about challenging!

This is NOT about knowing the right doctrine, or theology.

It’s not about right beliefs.

This story is all about *our actions, our compassion, and our hearts*.

Makes sense, because *Jesus was all about action, compassion, and the heart*.

The question is, are we?

This is a passage about *LOVE---a Radical kind of love*.

Now, we know this is a vision of judgment, at the end of time.

And it’s about our actions.

So, does this mean that we are *saved by our works*?

Do we have to DO this for our eternal salvation?

What if the answer is NO?

The sheep didn’t know they were serving Jesus.

They were just serving.

What if accepting God’s grace is the way to salvation,

And the result of that grace is our GRATITUDE,

And our service?

What if our love for the least of these, just flows out of our gratitude?

So it’s NOT that we earn salvation,

It’s that we live out the grace we have received.

And in the process,

we are *constantly surprised about where we find Jesus*.

So---will we serve the least of these?

We will *open our eyes, and pay attention* to those in need, near us?

Or will we *just talk about it, pray about it, and think about it?*

I ran across this convicting quote this week.

Listen to this:

*“I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger;
I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel
and prayed for my release;
I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance;
I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health;
I was homeless, and you preached to me of spiritual shelter and the love of God;
I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me.
You seem so holy, so close to God – but **I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.**” Jesus says **Bring me...food.***

James C. Howell, Nov 22, 2020, MinistryMatters.com

Maybe the most important thing to remember
is that we are called to serve the least of these---

because that’s where we find Jesus.

And we **CAN serve—no matter who we are, or where we are.**

This is not confined to pastors, social workers, or healthcare workers.

It really doesn’t matter what your occupation is,

Or if you have one.

It doesn’t matter if you are young or old,

What matters is----***what KIND of person are you?***

What kind of teacher?

What kind of friend?

What kind of board member?

What kind of neighbor?

What kind of student?

What kind of businessman are you?

Are YOU the kind who will serve the least of these?

When have YOU encountered the least of these?

Do you realize that every husband comforting a wife,

Every person supporting a dear friend,

every mother feeding an infant,

every child comforting a dying parent,

everyone serving, loving, caring for another,

has encountered our Lord Jesus Christ—in those in need?

Who is God asking you to serve---today? This week? This holiday season?

Where is God opening your heart, and eyes?
Will you serve the least of these?
And serve our Lord Jesus Christ?

Hear the Good News of the Gospel today.

We ALL encounter the least of these,

And we are asked to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked,
visit the imprisoned and lonely.

We are asked to welcome the stranger and visit the sick.

And every time we do this, for the least of these, ***we do it for Jesus.***

May we open our eyes, and our hearts, and spend our lives serving Him.
And all God's people can say together, Amen.