

COMPASSION AND JUDGMENT

Proper 29 Year A: Ephesians 1:15-23
Psalm 100
Matthew 25:31-46

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Key Passages: *“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.”* (Matthew 25:40)

A recent survey about Americans’ religious beliefs showed that a slim majority of us are not afraid of going to hell. About 15% of us have some fear, and 33% have quite a lot of fear about our ultimate destiny. (Baylor Religion Survey, as reported in *Christian Century*, October 25, 2017.)

I wish I knew more about other religious beliefs in the survey. I am interested in knowing whether the unpopularity of hell is a sign of general lack of interest in religious matters, or whether it grows out of an understanding of the depth of God’s mercy. In other words, lack of fear of hell may just mean that I don’t believe in God at all, or that I believe deeply in the message of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

For the last several weeks we have been reading stories from the end of Matthew’s gospel, parables that Jesus uses to help his disciples understand the urgency of being prepared for the coming of God’s kingdom. Today’s passage is the culmination of these stories on the last Sunday before Advent, called “Christ the King.” It’s the time that we acknowledge the lordship of Christ. The imagery is of splendor fit for a king. The Son of Man is coming in his glory. All the angels are around him. The nations—all of humanity in its infinite variety—are spread out around him. Picture the parade at the opening of the Olympics. Cue the trumpets. It’s a fantastic scene. The Son of Man speaks. He is judging the whole world. And what does he say? “Did you give me a drink of water?”

Christ the King, the Son of Man in his glory, makes a startling identification. He says, when you serve the least of these, you are serving him. Perhaps we get a little embarrassed by the phrase “the least of these.” Jesus’ words, in beautiful framed calligraphy, were hung on the walls of a soup kitchen where I once served. It seemed condescending to me. But then I looked again at the text, and it is the Son of Man who uses this phrase. So, we don’t get to place the label. Our task is to be attuned to the needs, not deciding who are worthy recipients. We often speak of ourselves as bringing Christ to the world, and that is certainly true. But here the emphasis is on meeting Christ in those to

whom we minister, to those in need. As she worked with the destitute and dying in India, Mother Teresa spoke of ministering to Christ “in his most distressing disguises.”

A priest who has spent his life working with gang-involved youth in California, tells of one of the first nights he went out on the streets. He had met one or two young men previously, and he knew where they tended to hang out at night. He rounded a corner in the semi-darkness and headed towards them. As he drew closer, one of the young men spotted him and muttered, “Jesus Christ! What are you doing here?”

The young man meant it as a curse. But the priest took it as a prayer. It became the prayer he often said when he went out on the streets: “Jesus Christ, what are you doing here?”

Jesus also speaks about the recipients of deeds of mercy as brothers and sisters. Those in need are members of God’s family. We tend to talk about “those people” as people other than ourselves. They are not a part of us. They are poor, addicted, unemployed. They are black or brown. They live in condemned houses or on the streets. Or maybe they live behind walls in gated communities. The Son of Man says, “If they are in need, they are my brothers.” We can’t define them away.

Every now and then someone says that we should run the church “like a business.” There are some useful aspects to this simile. Yes, we need to be mindful of costs and make plans rather than acting haphazardly. But at its heart, the church is not a business. A better metaphor is that church is a family. A family in which the strong take care of the weak, in which the underlying principles are relational, not transactional.

A common theme of the entire Bible is that God is biased in favor of the weak, that God judges a people by the ways in which it treats its powerless members. Today’s passage in Matthew makes it clear that only faithful obedience to God, as demonstrated by acts of love and mercy, will suffice at that time of judgment. The judgment rendered against those who have failed to act mercifully is that they are ultimately separated from God. Our failure to love our neighbors is our failure to love God. That is the point of the Last Judgment.

Encountering Christ in others teaches us compassion, the compassion that led God to identify with all of humanity in the person of Jesus, and that we trust God extends to each of us. When we experience God’s love for ourselves, we learn to act with love and mercy towards others. Our eyes are opened to our own failings and to the power of God’s forgiveness to help us find new ways of living. We hear about this power in today’s letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened so that we will know the hope and the power that God gives to us.

This gospel is for all of us who have ever said, “I just don’t get this religion stuff. I don’t connect with all these creeds and rituals and rules. It’s just not for me.” Here’s the good news. In the final scene, Jesus doesn’t say, “Did you get the theology straight? Can you explain the doctrine of the Trinity? Do you believe in the substitutionary theory of atonement? Do you know where the narthex is? Did you gamble or drink or sing Christmas carols during Advent?” He doesn’t even say, “Did you pay your pledge on time?” Instead he says, “Did you give me something to eat? Because if you didn’t, you missed me.”

Now before Geoff, our Treasurer, starts stoning me, let me say that many of the things that we do here—including paying our pledges--help us to feed the hungry and to welcome the stranger. Much of what we do is focused on growing our faith as disciples, both with practical skills and with a deepening sense of God’s love that undergirds all that we do. This growth must lead to acts of mercy and justice. Because, “at the end of the day,” as we say, God will ask us if we served Christ in those we met. God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love, by leading us to see that love at work in the world through our care for each other.

“Jesus Christ, what are you doing here?” I said that prayer to myself recently when I visited with Judge Kathleen Coffey, First Justice of the West Roxbury Court. She is doing remarkable work by developing “specialty courts” that use innovative ways of helping people who are mired in the criminal justice system. Working with public interest lawyers, the district attorney, and staff of Pine Street Inn, Judge Coffey has created the Homeless Court, the “Court of Second Chances”. Basically she has flipped the system so that persons who demonstrate that they are taking concrete steps to put their lives back together—such as enrolling in job training, completing a substance abuse program, or actively participating in mental health treatment—are able to have their warrants lifted and their records cleared so they can continue without the crippling effects of pending incarceration.

I went to one of the court sessions, and I listened as participants and their advocates reviewed their progress. It was apparent that for many this was an opportunity to tell their story publicly, receive encouragement from those supporting them, and become reconciled with a court system that they had feared for years and struggled to avoid. In the words of one of the attorneys, “Homeless clients are excluded people almost everywhere they go, but in Homeless Court they have their dignity recognized, they learn that they deserve stable and safe housing, and that the Commonwealth and the courts are merciful partners and supporters in that process.” (Boston Bar Journal, July 8, 2015)

More recently Judge Coffey joined a meeting of the Back Bay Association, where representatives from businesses, government, institutions, and churches

such as Old South and Trinity are meeting to discuss the growing problem of unhoused and addicted people in our neighborhood. We are trying to find compassionate and innovative approaches to working with individuals in a vexing set of circumstances. After the meeting I spoke with Judge Coffey and thanked her for the work that she is doing. She replied, modestly, “I am just trying to get to heaven, like everybody else.” I told her if she needed a letter of recommendation to let me know.

I think Judge Coffey and her cohorts capture the essence of the story of the Last Judgment. It is not fear of hell that motivates us. And it is not really about looking for a reward. Though they might not use these words, I believe these folks are motivated by the compassion of Christ, and this motivation drives them to take concrete actions that honor the dignity of each individual. Jesus embraces those who give a cup of water, or visit the sick and those in prison, or welcome the stranger, or clothe the naked. It is in these personal actions that we encounter Christ and experience the power of God’s love and mercy for ourselves and for those with whom we engage. It is in such actions that we hear the Son of Man say, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.”

The beautiful windows in our west front are titled “Christ in Majesty.” I love that this glorious Christ looks down on us each week—so motivating to us preachers and celebrants—and then sends us out into the world of Copley Square and beyond. Christ the King identifies with all of suffering humanity, in here and out there. We pray for the humility to welcome him into our hearts as we discover him in the faces of those we meet.

“Jesus Christ, what are you doing here?” Is that your prayer?