

Yearning for the Reign of Christ
Reign of Christ, Matthew 25:31-46
Grace Church Newton
November 26, 2023

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today my attention is drawn toward the liturgical calendar – the cycle by which we pass through the year together as the body of Christ. We move through the year reminding ourselves of the story of how God, out of love, entered into human history. The church year begins with Advent – next Sunday – as we are invited into the experience of *waiting* for God in human form. And then we progress through the year to today, this final Sunday of our church year, Reign of Christ Sunday. Today we proclaim our trust in the ultimate fulfillment of God’s dream: the reconciliation of all of creation in God; our redemption from violence and injustice and indifference – into wholeness. Today we celebrate the longed-for culmination of God’s work in the world. Next week, we begin anew, waiting.

Fittingly, on this last Sunday of the liturgical year, today’s gospel is the very last in a series of teachings in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew’s gospel, this is Jesus’ final instruction before entering Jerusalem, sharing the Passover meal with his apostles, and being betrayed into the hands of the Romans. Now, here at Grace, because of our worship calendar, we won’t have heard the readings leading up to today. These last weeks we have celebrated and worshipped with the readings from All Saints Day, the Feast of St. Andrew the Apostle, and Thanksgiving Day. If we had used the traditional Sunday lectionary through these weeks, though, the last few Sundays we would have noticed the following messages.

A few weeks back, from the parable of the ten bridesmaids, we would have heard Jesus telling his followers to “Get ready!” – unlike those called the “foolish bridesmaids” who failed to prepare for the bridegroom’s arrival, we are called to be alert to Christ’s presence in the world [Matt 25:1-13].

The next week we would have heard Jesus share the parable of the talents, in which a man, going on a journey, left his slaves with money to manage in his absence: one receives five talents, one receives two talents, and the last one, one talent. The first two slaves traded and took risks with the money they were stewarding, and when the man was back from his travels, both of them were able to return twice the amount that had been entrusted to them. The third slave – fearing a harsh response from his master – hid his one talent in the ground so as not to lose it. He returned only the one original talent. From Matthew’s telling of this parable, we might have reflected on the importance of stretching ourselves beyond our comfort zone, of taking risks, of being “all in.” Don’t bury your resources in the earth, we would have heard. Use them, use everything you’ve got for all it’s worth. Our world needs it.

Which brings us to today. In this final teaching, Jesus describes a scene of judgment, of separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep on the right side, deemed righteous, blessed by the father and worthy to inherit the kingdom. The goats on the left side, cursed, doomed.

And how will the sheep be distinguished from the goats? How do we identify those who are blessed from those who fall short? As one theologian writes: “There is nothing in [this passage] about ecclesiastical connections or religious practices. There is not a word in this passage about theology, creeds, orthodoxies. There is only one criterion here, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name” [[Source 336](#)]. The sheep are identified not by what they believe, but by material acts of love: offering food, giving drink, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner.

So, thinking about sheep...and goats...and practical, material care for “the least of these” (as Matthew’s gospel describes it), what lesson might we draw from this week’s text? And what might today – Reign of Christ Sunday – the day when we pray for God “to restore all things in [God’s] well-beloved Son” – what particular message might this gospel selection hold for us today?

As you probably know – especially those of you who were part of the Grace Discussion Group this morning – our lectionary follows a three-year cycle: Year A, B, and C. And each year features a different gospel – Matthew for Year A, next Sunday we begin with Mark for Year B, and then Luke is featured in Year C. So,

when I write sermons, I sometimes look back three years to see what I may have written on that same selection the last time it was used.

As it turns out, I did preach on Christ the King Sunday three years ago. In some ways, this same reading falls very differently on my ears today. At that point I was preaching into a camera, with only six vocalists and an organist in the sanctuary with me. We were at the height of the pandemic, the Delta variant was just picking up and lifting infection rates to previously unreachd heights. The ways we could show practical, material support for “the least of these” was to huddle in our homes, to stay apart, to help keep ourselves and others healthy as the virus raced through the country.

Today feels quite different. Though Covid infections continue – as so many of us know from recent experience – we understand the disease better and can better protect ourselves from its most serious impacts. Instead, the issue at the forefront for many of us today is the violence in Israel and Palestine – a complicated, deeply-rooted conflict. It’s hard to know what’s right. Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? What does it mean to give practical, material support to “the least of these” in this circumstance? Who are “the least of these”? It’s hard to know.

As Bishop Alan said in his address at our diocesan convention last month, “I do not know the solution to the intractable hostilities in the Middle East. I don’t think you do either” [[Source](#)]. His words. And it is hard to know. In many ways – not all, but many – it’s easier to be unified in response to a naturally-occurring pandemic than it is in this all-too human conflict.

And yet, today’s gospel message helps make some things clear. With this final parable, Jesus seems to be saying something like this: when we tend to “the least of these,” we tend to Christ. When we lose sight of Christ in others, the more like goats we become, the less we’re able to notice God calling us back into relationship; whereas the more we are connected to the presence of Christ in others, the deeper we are drawn into relationship with God, the deeper we are drawn into Love.

What does it mean, then, to tend to “the least of these” in a situation like the war in the Middle East? I find the words of columnist Nicholas Kristof to be particularly relevant. He writes in the *New York Times*: “If you weep only for Israeli children, or only for Palestinian children, you have a problem that goes beyond your tear ducts.

Fixing this crisis,” he continues, “starts with acknowledging a principle so basic that it shouldn’t need mentioning: All children’s lives have equal value, and good people come in all nationalities” [[Source](#)]. In other words, reject easy binaries, look for “agents of justice and peace” on all sides [[Source](#)]. In the language of today’s gospel, find Christ in others.

So, as we gather this morning, closing out our liturgical year, yearning for the Reign of Christ to be manifest in this world – for God to make creation whole – we hear the message of the gospel these last few weeks – Jesus’ final teaching according to Matthew:

“Stay alert,” Jesus says. “Stretch yourself, be all in, with all you have.” And “look for Christ in everyone, especially the least of these.” This is our calling. This is the way to the wholeness God calls us to today – and every day.

Amen.