

Ezekial 34:11-16,20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Today is Christ the King Sunday. And today, not coincidentally, is also the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Our Georgian calendar ends the year on December 31st. Our church calendar ends the year today on Christ the King Sunday, as we celebrate the kingship of Christ in his kingdom.

Now, those of you who know about such things will also know that next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the new church year. During the season of Advent we look forward to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Today is also the last Sunday of Ordinary time. By "Ordinary" we don't necessarily mean "common" or "mundane." The word "ordinary" comes to us from the Latin word "ordo," which means "regular" or "in a straight line." In the liturgical sense, "ordinary" can mean "counted time." The Sundays up to today haven't really been in a particular season, so they're just counted since Pentecost, the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Easter. But, today, on Christ the King Sunday, we have reached the end of ordinary time. The season of Advent takes us into a new time, a time of anticipation, a time of waiting, a time of imagining the birth of the Christ child, the promise of the kingdom of God come to us in this world.

For the past few Sundays, we have been listening to readings from Scripture about the end of times. It seems that with the end of times comes a time of judgment. Two weeks ago we heard about ten bridesmaids at a wedding celebration, but five of them had failed to bring enough oil for their lamps, and were therefore unprepared for the arrival of the groom. They were subsequently locked out of the kingdom. Last week three servants were given talents from their master and were told to go do something with the gifts that had been entrusted to them. Two servants put their talents to work and prospered, but one servant chose to do nothing with his gift, and he was cast into the outer darkness, where, we are told, there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Today, this familiar passage from the gospel is the last of Jesus' teachings in Matthew's story of the life of Jesus. Ages ago, when I was in college, one of our campus clubs sponsored what they called "The Last Chance" lecture series. Once a month, they would invite a professor, dean, or other notable grown-up to give us college kids a last-chance lecture. The premise was, if you had only this last chance to tell these kids something important that you wanted them to remember, what would you tell them? Such a premise tends to focus the mind. I can see this passage from late in the span of Matthew's gospel as Jesus' last-chance lecture to his disciples, and in turn to us.

There's no ambiguity in this last-chance lecture. No parable for us to decipher, no symbolism, no figurative speech, no servants with talents, no maids with oil for their lamps, no bridegroom closing the door to the wedding feast. We don't have to figure out anything in this passage. It's very, very clear.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on the throne of his glory.” This is a doomsday message – a description of the end of times. “All the nations will be gathered before him,” says Jesus the Christ. And what follows, once the Son of Man is on his throne, surrounded by his angels, and all the nations of man before him? A final judgment: “He will separate people, one from the other, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Even you and I can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat. At a distance of 50 yards on a foggy day, we could pick out one from the other, no problem. This is how easy Jesus tells us it will be for him to decide who of us goes to his left and who goes to his right.

It's real clear what will happen to those on the left: they will be accursed. Jesus commands that they depart from him (like the bridegroom he will close the door and say, “I do not know you.”), and they will be sent to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. That's pretty graphic stuff. It brings all sorts of horrific images to mind. In my youth as a Southern Baptist in Tennessee, our preachers never tired of delivering long and fiery sermons about what happens to those people on the left. Obviously, nobody wants to be one of them.

And what about the lucky folks on the right? “Come, you who are blessed by my father,” Jesus says, and “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” What on earth could we have done to have earned such a reward as inheriting the kingdom of God?

Here at the end of ordinary time, the Son of Man in his glory judges us. And by what will we be judged? By how holy we have been? By how closely we have followed the rules? By how pious we have been? By how well we have done church every Sunday, rain or shine? By all the big and showy things?

Apparently not. We're all familiar with what Jesus says next.

We will be surprised to hear how we are judged. Shocked even. “Lord,” we may say, “when did we?” We never saw YOU in need. We looked for you, sure, every day, but we never saw you. When was it that we showed YOU such mercy? You, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings?

“I was hungry, and you donated time and food to the local food bank. I was thirsty, and you gave money to help build a new well for a village in Kenya. I showed up at the church door, and you invited me in without judging me, showed me how to find the hymns in the hymnal, and took me to coffee hour. I had outgrown my old coat, and you bought a new jacket for the Fairview School coat drive. I was an old soldier at the veterans home in Yountville, and you came to visit me and made me some barbeque chicken. You

volunteered to become a literacy tutor at the library to help free me from the prison of not being able to read.”

Sometimes referred to as the six works of mercy, we have Food, Drink, Welcome, Clothing, Nursing care, and Visitation. Every person has the potential to provide these kinds of mercies. I don't need to be wealthy, well-educated, specially trained, or even talented to show mercy. The kinds of mercies that Jesus rewards here are within the reach of every one of us. They do not require great sacrifice on the part of the us, the mercy-givers, but these mercies may relieve great pain for the mercy-receiver, for the least of these. It would shock us to realize how much positive change just a few dollars could bring to the average family living in poverty. How much hope a few hours of our time might bring someone who is lonely and in misery.

“When you did it to ONE of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Imagine: the least of these are cherished members of the family of God. And even one of the least of these is important. Surely, we might say, in the overwhelming need of the world, helping one needy person can't be that significant. But apparently Jesus wants us to think about that. Mother Teresa is noted for having said, “If you can't feed 100 people, then feed just one.” The power of one is the key to the kingdom of heaven.

The “least of these.” We might be uncomfortable being around the least of these. They are not like us. Some of them have made really bad decisions that have put them in the misery they are now. Some of them may be scary and dangerous. Some of the least of these may never be well and whole.

But I think it goes all the way back to Jesus' second great commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He doesn't say that we have to feel all warm and fuzzy about our neighbor. We aren't told to try to find something in common with our neighbor that will help us feel more comfortable about being around him. We aren't told to work at feeling loving before we express a loving gesture. We aren't told to *feel* love. We are told to *express* it. We are told that we must decide to love our neighbor, even if we're not sure our neighbor deserves it. After all, we want people to decide to love us, as we are, where we are. It stands to reason, then, that other people – especially the least, the lost, and the last – would hope that we would decide to love them. This is an exercise of spiritual and personal growth for many of us. It wouldn't hurt any of us to try to show more mercy, and it wouldn't hurt any of us to feel a bit more humble and grateful in counting our own blessings.

Tomorrow morning, when we're looking at ourselves in the mirror and brushing our teeth, let us remember this:

Of all the children living in Solano County, nearly one-fifth are living in what is called “food-insecure households.” For them breakfast, lunch, and dinner are not the regular parts of a day that they may be for us. On some days, there is nothing for them to eat. Of Solano County’s 22,000 school children, it is estimated that over 48% -- nearly half -- are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches, because of economic need in their household.

As of December of last year, the number of homeless in Solano County was estimated to be around 5000 people. Of these 5000, 2200 or so are school children. That’s in Solano County. Closer to home, in the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District, about 1100 students are homeless, with no permanent place to hang their clothes or do their homework. Many of them double-up with friends, sleeping in dining rooms, on living room couches, in bathrooms, garages, and closets. Some spend the night in a car. Some teenage students are required to trade sexual favors for a place to sleep tonight. We can fit right around 200 people in the pews of this church building. To fit all of our school district’s 1100 homeless children into this building, we’d have to fill every space in every pew more than five times.

National surveys tell us that about 20% of American adults – one in five – is functionally illiterate. Cannot read a recipe, cannot read the instructions on how to take a medication, cannot help their children with homework. These people are locked in a prison of ignorance, and they live in a confusing world full of things they cannot understand. Their prospects of ever landing a job that offers security and a decent income are very dim.

Because of war, famine, natural disaster, disease, and conflict between religions and cultures, millions of people worldwide have become refugees, displaced by the violence and uncertainty in their own home towns. The United Nations estimates that worldwide we have today some 51 million refugees and displaced persons, the greatest number of refugees since World War II. Some of these millions are right here in Fairfield, having escaped from Central American countries where law and order are merely meaningless words. 51 million people who have no home and no jobs, and who wonder where they will find adequate food and medical care. Families who have lost everything through no fault of their own. Their numbers overwhelm local relief efforts. It may be very hard for those of us who live secure and predictable lives to grasp the enormity of this world-wide tragedy. 51 million people is equal to every person who lives in California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho combined.

In the back of the church I have placed some blue sheets of paper that have some information about a few organizations who minister to the least of these among us. Among them are the Heater House, Oxfam, Episcopal Community Services, Mission Solano, the Salvation Army, Food for the Poor, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano Counties, Sleep Train's Foster Child Support Program, and the Solano County Library Adult Literacy Program. This is not an exhaustive list; it's only a start. Out of 100, it is one.

I would hope that you would take one of these sheets of paper, and search your soul for an opportunity to contribute substantially to one or more of these outreach efforts. Some are local; some are world-wide. All answer an overwhelming need. And, of course, there are many others that could use our support. Without us, they cannot sustain their effort of being for us, on our behalf, the healing hands of Jesus in this painful world.

When we accept that loving our fellow person is a decision that we as people of faith must make, we begin to understand that we cannot wait until we feel merciful to show mercy. We cannot wait until we feel generous or kind to be generous and kind. When we understand that we must decide to love, we have to accept that we must step out in faith and risk being uncomfortable in this world.

I invite you to resolve, here at the end of ordinary time, as we enter a new Advent season, to decide to love the least of these who are among the family of Jesus. As people of faith, we are called upon to provide answers to the questions, "Lord, when did I see you? Lord, when did I love you?" Let us pray that we are ready with our answers.

Amen.