

Pastor T.C. Arnold
2nd to Last Sunday in the Church Year
Matthew 25:31-40
November 15th, 2015

Just a little more than three hundred years after Jesus Christ lived and ascended into heaven there was a man born in a small town in what is now the country of Hungary. The name given to this man was Martin. He was the son of a Roman Soldier. Like most of the people in what was called “the Roman Empire” in the west Christianity was very scarce. His mother and father were pagans and did not believe in the Lord. When Martin was about ten years old he found his way to a Christian Church and began to take instruction. This, of course, was done against the wishes of his parents. As Martin grew, he became what his father was – a soldier in the Roman guard.

One day, when Martin was guarding a gate in the city of Amiens in northern France, he came across a man who was nearly freezing to death in the cold. He had very little clothing to keep himself warm. So, Martin tore his “military issued” cloak into two parts and shared half of it with this freezing man. That night, Martin had a dream. In his dream he saw Jesus standing before him with the half of his cloak that he shared with that freezing man at the gate that day. From that day on Martin knew what he was to do. He received a peaceful discharge from his duties as a Roman Soldier, got baptized, and dedicated the rest of his life in service to the Lord.

That’s quite a story. It’s a true story. Also, it’s a story that reflects quite graphically what Jesus shares with us in the Gospel text appointed for this Sunday. Jesus said, “*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*” Jesus tells with us that when we feed, clothe, and help those who are in need – we are feeding, giving warmth and covering up nakedness, and assisting Christ Jesus Himself. Now that’s powerful imagery. Have you ever thought of it that way? When that person who is standing before you begging and in need – probably in dirty, tattered cloths and hasn’t had a bath in weeks – is actually our Lord asking you for help.

As this is the second to the last Sunday in the Church Year we continue our focus on the end times – when the Lord will come to judge both the living and the dead. Jesus shows us how He recognizes those who are sitting at His right – those who have the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. He tells us this and puts it in terms that we can understand – solid concrete terms. Those who are shown mercy are the same that showed mercy to others.

Now we have to be careful with a statement like that. I’m not saying that those who are saved are those who earned a spot in heaven by all the great things they did for people who don’t seem to deserve it. Rather, I’m saying that Jesus can recognize a living faith in all of us by seeing what naturally flows from that faith – being examples of Christ in our works of mercy. As Christians, does our faith produce works of mercy? Yes! That can be seen through what we do as examples of Christ every day of our lives.

Works of mercy in a Christ-like example are very important – not in order to be saved – but for those who Christ Jesus loves. It’s easy for us to take what we have for granted when we have such comfortable surroundings. Even when we are left belly-aching over what our neighbor has, that is something more than I’ve got, we really have no reason to complain. We are blessed beyond measure. If we could put our lives next to the world’s vast majority as a yard stick – we would be able to see quite quickly – we are so blessed.

Georgia Witt, our member/missionary who works in the Library at the Lutheran Seminary in Kenya is collecting laptops – old used laptops. They don’t have enough computers for the sake of the students who are studying to become pastors. She has asked me for smaller stuff like posters for the wall, general supplies and such things we might take for granted. She commented on how she sees the poverty of the people she works with and loves very much each and every day. Georgia mentioned that it is a

good day for her when the power does not shut off and the food in her refrigerator stays cold. We are indeed blessed.

And when Jesus says, “...as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” We actually clothe Jesus, we actually feed Jesus, we actually give shelter to Jesus in these acts of mercy. Are these acts important? Well if we are doing them to Jesus – then they must be important. And that’s what we are doing. With acts of mercy Jesus is the recipient. He is the one who receives our good and gracious work for our neighbor in need.

But we don’t always see it that way. There are times when there are people who have their hand out waiting for you to help them – and we automatically think, “They are trying to take advantage of me. They just don’t want to work for money – they want to beg off of others.” Maybe there are times this is true. And for our sake – and theirs – we do need to guard against such things. But if we become less than benevolent to those who truly need our help – and to those who may just need our help right now – we may be passing by an opportunity to serve our Lord. Sometimes our selfishness gets in the way. “I’m not giving up my hard earned cash – it’s mine.” Let us not harden our hearts to the point that we forget to see Jesus in those we help. Our selfishness can exclude our Lord.

Consider this, beloved in the Lord, when our heavenly Father gave His only begotten Son to die on the cross for us, He excluded no one. With Our Savior Jesus’ precious sacrifice He offers heaven to each and every soul the world has ever seen. Jesus did not die for the sins of just a few – those who do enough – those who belong to a certain class of people or race. Jesus came to take upon Himself the sins of every human being that has graced God’s green earth. That’s what He did – that’s how much He loves – that’s how indiscriminate Jesus was – Everyone was included in that hope and promise.

Not all take Christ up on this promise. Many have gone their own separate ways apart from Christ and have sought different avenues by worshiping false gods. They desire not to have the Gift of Life Jesus gives so freely. They might not even know anything about Jesus. Are our works of mercy important? Yes, and so are our words of encouragement and comfort for those who are lost. Speaking the truth of the Gospel to a fallen and misguided world goes hand and hand with works of mercy for those who need food to eat and shelter from the elements. We shouldn’t attempt to separate the two. Serve Christ as we serve those who represent Christ Jesus in this world – whoever that might be. Share the Word as we share His work.

Beloved in the Lord, God speaks volumes to us again today – this time through His Word and simple water. Aurora, having received the blessings of Baptism, has been given something special we hope to even share with so many others. Through that water – Christ gave his precious blessing through His sacrifice – yes even for a baby. It’s a blessing offered to all people – all are included, even Aurora. We have the opportunity to remember that blessing given to us – many of us as infants – when we see a child receive this gift from God. This is how God has mercy on Aurora. This is how God has mercy on us. We don’t deserve this grace – not for one minute of our lives. Yet we have it, through what Jesus has done for us.

Remember that man I was talking about earlier by the name of Martin. Well, his heart for those in need was recognized by many different people. They asked Martin to go to the city of Tours in France to be the Bishop there. He died on November 11th 397 A.D. And more than 1,400 years later a child born in Germany to a couple with the name Hans and Margareta Luther was baptized on this very same day of the month – Nov. 11th (St. Martins Day) Of course, they would give him the same name at his Baptism – Martin Luther.

What a blessing to receive our name at Baptism like Aurora did today. What a blessing that Jesus has placed His name on our heart and called us His own. We rejoice and wait for Him. We have His blessed eternal life. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.