

LORD, WHEN WAS IT THAT WE SAW YOU?

by

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(Christ the King Sunday)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



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Texts:

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

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

One of the so-called reality shows on TV these days is *Undercover Boss*. Perhaps you have seen one or more of the segments. Each week the show follows a different

CEO or very high official of a major corporation as they go undercover to work with their various employees out in the field. Each week the CEO works alongside rank-and-file employees and sees how it is to work in the company at that level. There are many aspects of the show ranging from CEO's becoming extremely remorseful at working conditions, the policies handed down from the top have caused, to extreme pride over the conscientiousness of the employees, to the inability of the CEO to do the job of the employee. And occasionally there is a situation where the CEO is not pleased with the way someone is doing their job. The whole premise of the show is that no one recognizes the CEO. He or she works in anonymity to see how things really happen in the world of the employees. At the end of the show, the CEO reveals his or her identity, and they all get to talk about the experience together. Often times, it is very emotional and ultimately very helpful for all concerned.

In the gospel reading for this Christ the King Sunday, Jesus reveals that he often works undercover, too. His employees, you and me if you will, do not recognize him as we encounter him along the way. He shows up in the form of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the one in prison. And just like the television show, those who did their work well and those who did not, do not recognize the boss. All the ones in the parable responded to those in need without knowing it was, in effect, Jesus. That is to say that Jesus is always present in the most vulnerable among us.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you?”

“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.”

This is the last parable of Jesus. We move pretty quickly from the last parable to the Last Supper. The last parable reflects a graphic concern for the least and the last, the most vulnerable and marginalized among us.

When we pay attention to the teachings of Jesus, we tend to think at the level of personal ethics, and that is certainly one of the things we should hear in this parable. But remember how the parable begins. “And all the nations will be gathered before him...”

Most other parables are indeed about individual values and lifestyles. This last concern of Jesus is about how the nations of the world treat their peoples. The authorities of his day knew that he was not just talking about personal piety. Within a few hours of this public teaching in Jerusalem, Jesus would be arrested, tried, and convicted by the state. As Christians, we believe that Jesus holds us accountable for our actions, especially how we treat those in need.

In the liturgical cycle of the Christian calendar, today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in our liturgical year before the cycle begins again next Sunday with the first Sunday in Advent. Christ the King Sunday acknowledges Christ is the final authority in all things spiritual and temporal. The parable of the Last Judgment anticipates the culmination of God's creation and sets the standards by which we are to live and by which we shall be judged.

There are several things to note about this parable. One is that Jesus notices and cares about how we treat people, especially how we treat the poor and the vulnerable: the hungry, the stranger in our midst, the sick and the prisoner.

How do we respond to the most needy among us in our world today?

It is a hard question in our complex, complicated society. There are many mitigating factors relating to the conditions of people in our world today. There are lots of things you could say about those in need among us. Sometimes, it is hard to sort it all out. In a simpler world, in a more rural society, we knew how to take care of people in need. We didn't always do it, but we felt like we kind of knew what we ought to do. In our world today, it is hard.

How do we respond to all the needy among us today?

Everybody does have some personal responsibility to do what they can for themselves. But for those who can't do it because of circumstances or lack of real opportunity or illness or hardship, we are asked by Christ to do what we can to help them. It is about personal piety, but as the beginning of the parable makes clear, it is about Christ the King holding the nations of the world accountable for their actions.

Is it hard to know the right way to respond in our complex world?

It is.

But after all of the “what ifs” and “buts” and “you knows,” Jesus still wants to know how did you treat the needy in your midst. The first thing to note is that Jesus cares about how we treat people, especially the most vulnerable among us.

The second thing to note in the parable is that how we treat the other is how we treat Jesus.

Jim Wallis of the Sojourner Organization tells the story of gathering one morning when the volunteers who feed the hungry were preparing for the day ahead when the long line of homeless folks would pass through for something to eat. Someone asked one of the workers to pray, and she said, “Jesus, help me to see your face when you come through the line.”

We see those same faces every day over at Abraham Station. It is hard but important to remember that Jesus is standing in line. How we treat others is how we treat Jesus.

Now the other thing to note is that in the parable, both those who helped and those who didn’t really weren’t aware of how significant their actions were. Jesus, when did you come through the line? I didn’t see you. “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.” And of course, “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.”

That is, you do what you do not for reward or acclaim, but just from what is in your heart.

Last Saturday, hundreds from our congregation either sent money or packaged meals or both to help feed the hungry. It was time and money well spent to help feed the hungry, almost 75,000 meals. You did it because of what was in your heart.

As it turned out, I was not able to be here last Saturday because I attended a funeral of a beloved pastor friend and mentor, Jack Shoultz. Some of you may have known him. He served the Westbury United Methodist Church here in Houston and served as District Superintendent at two different times in two different districts. He was my first District Superintendent when I came out of seminary in 1974.

Jack was from Grapeland in East Texas, not that far from my hometown. We played them in football when I was in high school. After retirement, Jack moved back to Grapeland, so his funeral was held at First United Methodist Church Grapeland. It was standing room only. I arrived 30 minutes early and stood for the whole service. There were many Jack Shoultz stories to share with the overflow crowd. He was a big person with a big heart who did lots of good for lots of people in quiet ways and in sometimes more public ways. One such action seems relevant for our thoughts today.

Several years ago on the floor of Annual Conference, we were debating issues of health care for clergy and trying to find ways to hold the cost down. Our package at the time covered the birth of a child but not any of the costs for adoption. It would cost us all more money if we added that option. Jack Shoultz rose to speak in favor of covering some of the costs of adoption for clergy families. As he closed his speech he said, “You know, one of our two daughters is adopted from the Methodist Mission Home in San Antonio, but right now I can’t remember which one.” We added adoption to our health care coverage. All people are part of the family of Jesus. We should treat them as such.

This is Christ the King Sunday. We will enjoy the Thanksgiving holiday this week.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent.

Two weeks from today is Commitment Sunday when you indicate your financial support for the ministries of the church for the coming year. It is finally all about finding room in your heart to do the right thing for all of God’s family. Jesus is working among us as our undercover boss, observing how we respond to human need.