

## *Sunday Sermon November 22, 2020*

On this final Sunday of the church year – Christ the King Sunday – our Gospel passage is a final judgement scene. It pictures the Son of Man sitting on his throne in glory, surrounded by his angels. He separates the righteous from the unrighteous, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

Personally and as a preacher, I have often reflected on the goats – the “unrighteous” – on those who did not feed the hungry, or give drink to the thirsty, or welcome the stranger, or cloth the naked, or comfort the sick and those in prison. I have used this passage to ask: when in my own life have I failed to see Christ present in my neighbor in need? And I’ve asked congregations: when did you miss Him? The passage might be suggesting it’s easy – easy to miss Him, easy to be blind to Christ present in our midst.

In my previous parish in Duluth, the church was next door to a Catholic Worker community for the homeless, and we, as a parish, supported them in various ways. We had a summer program where our youth made meals and did projects at the Loaves and Fishes houses, and we would have people who had been living on the streets, now housed there, come and talk to our youth: tell their stories, talk about what it’s like to be homeless. And our kids would ask them questions. One time, we came to the question part of the program and one of the kids asked a guest what the hardest part of being homeless was...

I was thinking he might say sleeping in the cold, or finding enough to eat, or being harassed by the police – but after a thoughtful pause, the tall, slender man said: “being invisible” “no one wants to look at you, when you’re living on the streets.”

This might have been what happened to the goats. They were blind. They didn’t see their neighbor in need as a beloved child of God, made in God’s image and likeness. They didn’t see a brother or sister. They didn’t see them.

And so this story of the final judgment challenges us to “see with the eyes of the heart” as it says in Ephesians today, to see others, especially the stranger and those in need, as God sees them, as beloved – and to reach out to them in love. The goats were surprised that God was in their midst disguised as a hungry person, a naked person, a sick person, a stranger, a prisoner. Perhaps “those people” were simply invisible to the goats and so they were surprised because they hadn’t seen them.

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But it's interesting... it's interesting to note that the sheep – the righteous – were surprised as well. They ask the same question: “Lord, when did we feed you and give you drink and clothing and welcome and visit you?”

Don't you think they would have remembered? If I have a five to the guy with the cardboard sign at the stoplight, I remember. If I help serve lunch at a soup kitchen, or donate cloths, I remember.

But the righteous were surprised. They simply saw need and responded. They gave to the stranger the way they would give to a member of their own family. They weren't keeping score. It was a reflex, a pastoral reflex, so natural, so much a part of who they were, that they didn't even remember.

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A story: I did not peak in high school. My first two years were rather miserable. I was not one of the smart kids. I was not one of the athletic kids. I was not one of the cool kids. I was not one of the good looking kids.

I was somewhat shy and awkward. I was pudgy and had thick glasses. I struggled socially and academically.

And then I had Mr. Holm for biology. Mr. Dennis Holm. And it changed my life. He helped me understand the subject and gain confidence. He helped me to fit in during class and gave me extra time after. He encouraged and challenged me. His door was always open and I spent a lot of time in his room, just him and me, and it was a turning point in my life. He was one of those teachers. The ones who make a huge difference in the lives of struggling teenagers.

15 years after graduating, I attended our class reunion, and Mr. Holm was there. I couldn't wait to talk to him and tell him what a difference he made in my life, and how it was a turning point, and all that he meant to me.

And he listened politely as I babbled on. He smiled and nodded his head. And that was it. I don't think he remembered me...

I was a little hurt, but then it occurred to me: he didn't remember because he had done that for hundreds, maybe thousands, of kids.

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That was who he was, a teacher who saw suffering and did something to heal it, saw potential, and did something to draw it out. Not to win the praise of his colleagues, or to climb the ladder or even to be thanked a decade and a half later, but just because I mattered, and he was good at helping struggling teenagers see that in themselves.

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Bishop Rob Wright, speaking to us clergy last week, talked about how Jesus “mattered” people. Women, lepers, Samaritans, tax collectors, outcasts and sinners of every stripe mattered to Jesus, because they mattered to God. Jesus responded to them the same way he would respond to a member of his own family, because He knew that’s who they were – part of God’s family – and He wanted them to know it too.

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One final thought – can you tell I really like this Gospel passage?

It’s not directly related to my previous thoughts, but it’s a good one. Dave Lose says that one of the things this passage teaches us is that “God’s manifestation and presence is not some mountain-top experience or the result of an arduous spiritual journey but instead connected to actual, physical bodies and circumstances. Want to see Jesus? Look to the needs of your neighbor and, especially, your most vulnerable neighbors”

For it is in them, I would add, that you will see the face of Christ.