

Last Pentecost – Christ the King – Year A – Proper 29 - November 23, 2008
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46
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Most recently in the news we have heard that thousands of homes that have fallen into foreclosure because of unmanageable debt. Empty houses have become a visible sign of the problem of debt. The less visible signs are letters and bills marked “final notice” or monthly credit card statements where the minimum payment becomes a real stretch. Culturally, debt is the norm. Very few people can afford to make a major purchase like buying a house or a car without borrowing at least some money. The business of debt is an industry in itself, including payday loans and collection agencies. Before we moved to Arizona, I received some puzzling phone calls. At first, it was a stranger who asked to speak to me by name. When I confirmed my name, he asked if I owned a Honda. I said I didn’t and that he must have me confused with someone else. End of conversation. A few weeks later, I received another phone call. The conversation began in the same way then quickly spiraled into loud and obnoxious accusations. It was a debt collector and they had the right name, but the wrong person.

Today is the last Sunday of ordinary time and the feast day of Christ the King, who is seated in glory on His heavenly throne. It is the culmination of the church’s liturgical year, which will begin again next Sunday with the four-week season of Advent, where we will prepare hearts and minds to receive Christ anew. During this long season after Pentecost, we have visited extensively with the Gospel of Matthew and heard a lot about the Kingdom of God. Where the Body of Christ is present on earth, the Kingdom of God is evident, and Christ our Lord and King is present.

Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew alone has blessed us with a vision of the Last Judgment. In Matthew’s collection of parables, he has revealed for us a sharp comparison of the way the world works as antithetical to God’s Kingdom. The parable of the vineyard placed Jesus first and foremost as the foundation stone for those who build upon faith with love, or the stone that crushes for those who reject Him. The parable of the wedding banquet told us about the Jews as God’s chosen people, and the Gentiles as those called to new life in Christ. The story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids reminds us that our salvation is assured by grace and faith in Jesus. And that we are each invited by the Lord to grow in grace by loving and serving others throughout our lifetime. Paradoxically, life does not end with death, but becomes a celebration of new life in the nearer presence of Christ Jesus. Last week we discovered the truth about God’s love as the source of real wealth to which you and I each respond as stewards. Throughout the Scriptures there are constant reminders that the most important goal of our lives is to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and to show others the way. Many of the Matthean stories are aimed at instructing the Judean leaders of Jesus’ day on the right interpretation of Torah. But they are also lessons for Christians in the meaning of the Great Commandment, God as the Creator and owner of all things, and you and me as stewards by God’s grace. We have been learning so much about who we are, who God desires us to be, and what God calls us to do that we may have assumed that today’s reading from Matthew is also about us.

There is a Methodist hymn that includes these words, “Are you ready? Are you ready? Ready for the Judgment Day? When the saints and the sinners / Shall be parted right and left / Are you ready for the Judgment Day?” Many of us have spent hours wondering if we have done enough or are good enough to make the cut as sheep, and have worried secretly about whether we are really goats. Clearly, you and I would not be alone if we thought that this reading was about the judgment of Christians. Like the phone calls I received about a debt I did not owe, today’s Gospel reading presents us with a bit of a curve ball: right ballpark, wrong team.

One of the most frequent questions clergy get asked is along the lines of, “what happens to everyone who isn’t a Christian? Do they really go to hell?” Usually followed quickly by, “but what about everyone who never heard the Gospel or died before Jesus was born?” These questions are

important ones, given that we live in a country that is growing in religious diversity. One piece of good news is that today's Gospel provides us with some very helpful insights to help us answer these questions, because this passage is only indirectly about Christians. That is you and I, God's children, who have been called by our Shepherd and responded. Nor is this passage about Jews, the children of God who are the elect or chosen ones with a specific role and mission in the world. It is, as we will see, about others.

First, let's look at how we know this judgment scene is not about Christians. There are, in fact, several separate judgment scenes described in Scripture. The one in this passage is commonly called the great white throne judgment. Another is the judgment seat of Christ, or *bema* judgment. At the end of the age, every single person living or dead will be accountable to Christ the King, who is the judge of all. Another slice of good news: as Christians, you and I have already been judged. Through our Baptism into Christ's Body, we have been forgiven for our sins, sealed as Christ's own, and born into new and unending life through the power of the Holy Spirit. God has forgiven all members of the Body of Christ. He no longer sees our sins because by His grace and our faith in His Son, we are clothed in Christ's righteousness. Because our salvation is assured, we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ or *bema*, where as stewards of God's grace and love we will render an accounting for our life in Christ and receive our reward.

Another way we know that this scene is not about Christians comes from the text itself. Each Gospel writer has a specific and usually consistent way of using language. In Matthew, two terms in particular are well defined by the writer's usage. One is for "nations", clearly meaning non-Jews or Gentiles. And the other is for those described as "the least of these, members of my family" meaning you, me, and all members of the Body of Christ. Now that we know whom Matthew is talking about, we see that all the nations gathered before Jesus' throne are all the non-Christian Gentiles. Jesus, in all His glory, sits in perfect judgment on the great white throne and determines who of all the non-Christian Gentiles will receive the gift of salvation, and who will not. In God's great mercy, the criteria for salvation are simple and relate directly to the Body of Christ. They are how non-Christian Gentiles have treated "the least of these, members of my family". In other words, God's kingdom of love and grace will ultimately extend to those whom **Jesus** rightly judges to have treated members of the Body of Christ kindly and compassionately. How sad that day will be for all who must stand before Jesus, a stranger to them, but nonetheless their judge, to learn their everlasting destiny, when it is too late to do anything about it. What a sorry indictment on the Body of Christ who did not take every opportunity to share the Good News with all people in this lifetime.

This is not universalism. As much as God desires that all be reconciled to Him through His Son Jesus, as the story unfolds, it is explicit that not everyone will be saved. However, let us also be clear that there is nothing outside of God the Creator. Hell is not some place outside of God, or something God does to us. Hell is, and can only be, the farthest extreme of God's grace, and our eternal destination is a choice. C.S. Lewis describes it this way, "Sin is a person saying to God throughout life, 'Go away and leave me alone.' Hell is God finally saying to that individual, 'You may have your wish.'" God graciously grants us free will. At the end of the age, God will essentially foreclose on every soul for a final accounting. Our debt, and the debt owed by all humanity has already been paid once for all by Jesus for all who accept the Word in faith. Our final snippet of good news today is that all Christians are blessed with continuing stewardship of Jesus' mission to the world that is the ministry of reconciliation, and the joy of bringing those who do not know Christ to the knowledge and love of Him.

Amen.