

2 Corinthians 9:11-15 ~ Matthew 25:31-46

Kin-dom Power

Christ the King ~ Pledge Dedication Sunday ~ November 22, 2020

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Introduction to Gospel Reading

Congratulations! We made it to the third and final week of our “Apocalyptic Training” series. And we made it to Christ the King Sunday, which means we made it to the last Sunday of the year. I’m not talking about the calendar year 2020. I mean the Christian liturgical year. Our cycle of stories that begins with Jesus’ Advent and ends today, with Christ the King. Next Sunday, November 29, begins our new liturgical year, the First Sunday of Advent, when we get to start lighting Advent candles and looking forward to celebrating Jesus’ birth on December 25.

Today is our day to honor Christ the King. A day to look back over the past year and ask ourselves, who really has been the Lord of our lives this past year? To whom or what did we give our supreme allegiance? Was it Jesus, or someone else? At our last confirmation class session, we asked our confirmands for what or whom would they protest? And what would their sign say? We are, after all, Protestants, and called to stand up for King Jesus, and all that he stands for—never standing down until God’s kingdom of righteousness and justice come to this earth.

What does King Jesus stand for? He breaks it down for us in the passage you are about to hear, the final section of Matthew 25. He began with two other parables to help us see what his kingdom, the kingdom of heaven *will be like*: we had the stories of the bridesmaids and the talents, where we heard Jesus imploring his disciples to practice *staying* power and *risking* power. Even when they feel like their lamps are out and they have nothing to give; even when they get scared and run away from the gift they have been given.

Today’s story is Jesus’ final teaching in the Gospel of Matthew before his passion begins. His last chance to bring it home to all his knuckleheaded disciples (including us). He will tell us what the staying and risking are all for. Get ready to hear our marching orders, Apocalyptics. This scripture text reveals the apocalyptic truth Jesus wants us to see and do something about.

Sermon

Does anybody else feel like the Grinch is now trying to steal Thanksgiving? “It could be his head wasn’t screwed on right. It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all, May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.” That’s how Dr. Seuss puts it in his classic *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I can tell you our family has changed its plans for Thanksgiving again and again as COVID numbers have continued to climb. Just yesterday we made the hard and final decision to stay put. No one is traveling anywhere. We won’t get to enjoy being with our kids and grandkids as we had hoped. Does it feel like the Coronavirus Grinch is trying to steal your Thanksgiving too?

You may recall, that in the gospel according Seuss, Grinch has a moment of revelation and deeper truth at the end of this tale, an apocalyptic turn, you might say: “And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! ... Maybe Christmas, he thought, ‘doesn’t come from a store.’” Nor does the *source* of our thanks, the *fount* of our blessings, come from a steaming turkey with all the trimmings, or a table filled with familiar faces young and old. This year has been and still is a puzzler. Surely our puzzlers are sore. And our

hearts are broken by the rising death toll, now climbing past a quarter of a million former turkey eating Americans, no longer able to be at anyone's table on this earth. News of effective vaccines suggest a light at the end of this tunnel. Thanks be to God. But numbers keep rising and the tunnel is still long.

We are worshipping together right now, because we know that God is the one from whom all blessings flow. No Grinch of any stripe can prevail over our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. God is the one who stopped at nothing to give us healing and salvation by becoming one of us. By showing us what Divine Love looks like in human form. What is the size of God's heart? It is not two sizes too small. It is indescribably big. How do we know? The cross is our answer. Literally and metaphorically. The cross shows us what love looks like: God to each us in the vertical, and God between and within all of us in the horizontal. Jesus taking the pain and sin of the world in his body on the cross. Not only on that Friday in Jerusalem. But in every COVID death, in every suffering soul all over the world. But we know that God took our "no" and answered it with a "yes." And that because of the Risen Christ, we know that LOVE wins. Divine Love for all of humankind, "all the nations."

The way we are being called to show our thanks this year, is to do our part to contain and stop the spread of this deathly virus. This is a personal sacrifice, for the good of all. For us, as Christians, we have a King who made the supreme sacrifice for the good of all the world, all the nations, as our scripture tells us. There is no distinction in this story made on the basis of belief or doctrine, or even religious practice for that matter. This story gathers up all the nations, people all across the political spectrum. The only division that matters to Jesus in this judgment story is between those who show compassion for others in need, and those who do not.

Why do we care about people we don't know, people we don't like, people who are different from us? Because Jesus our King does. And if he is truly our King, then so must we. In this story, Jesus identifies clearly that "the least of these" are all members of his family. Where is the puzzle there? King Jesus showed us: it's not just about me and mine. It's about us, which is everyone. We can thank "The *mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz for taking the word "Kingdom" and dropping the "g" so that it becomes "Kin-dom" a word that better describes the heart of this parable. As she has written, "Kin-dom makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other: we will indeed be the family of God."ⁱⁱ

Maybe this Thanksgiving, when safety is calling us to reduce and minimize the number of people at our literal table, God is calling us to expand our hearts and our vision, our definition of "family" to include the whole human race. And to give thanks for all of our human family, who could never fit at our table, anyway. In the midst of the bitter divisions that COVID has revealed and exacerbated, I hear Christ calling us all to take a collective breath. Turn off our social media habit for a day, perhaps. And instead to acknowledge the shared stress and pain within our families and across the land and world, and be thankful for God's unifying, healing presence.

Matthew 25 calls us to ask: "Do I recognize Jesus in you?" "Do I see our family resemblance?" And to keep looking, until we do. Jesus is not expecting us to all get along, or all agree with each other. What human family does? Or what church does? For Jesus, and the work of the kin-dom, that is not the point. We are being judged by what actions we take to help those who are hurting, bound, hungry, or homeless. And by what we do not do. So looking back over the year,

what did we do by Jesus' metric? What might we do differently, next year? The King is on his throne, watching.

Have we been a sheep or a goat this year? We have next year to try to do better. I believe that the truth is, all of us are some combination of both. It's not an either/or. It's a both/and. What person on earth has always helped everyone in need? What person have never helped a single soul? There's sheep and goat in each of us. The other revelation I see in this text is the surprising both/and that is Jesus. He is the bread and he is the hungry person. He is the one who feeds us, and is the person who needs to be fed. Whether we are being helped, or being the helper: the holy exchange, the sacred sharing is where the "kin-dom" gains its power and traction on this earth. Certainly, in this year of profound loss, many of us have felt like strangers even in our homeland; many are feeling hungry and thirsty; imprisoned in one way or another, and too many of us have been and are sick.

It's about the sharing power of divine compassion that can right the wrongs and free us from systems of oppression that will continue when the pandemic subsides. It's about acknowledging the systems and structures that have discounted too many of God's children for too long: and doing something about it. COVID has shined a light on the work at hand for us. Why are there groups of people who are the "least of these"? Jesus is telling us this is wrong and King Jesus wants us to do something about it.

Are we sheep or goats? We want to be sheep. That's why we are a Matthew 25 church. What does that mean? We have said "yes" to this challenge, that Jesus issued in this text and our PCUSA has articulated for us. Being a Matthew 25 means this: We are called to live out true discipleship by acting boldly, compassionately and fearlessly serving people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor. We break that down into three areas of focus: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. What have we done this year? Orange SOS bags to fill with food distributed to churches and organizations in Marshfield, Canasta "Free Basic Baskets." We have also been learning how to be Antiracists. Not easy, but we've started. What do we need to address next year? Christ the King is calling us to do something about systemic food insecurity, health care policy, discriminatory housing systems, unjust immigration policy and practices, as well as our criminal justice system. What will we do? Jesus is watching.

Today is pledge Sunday when we have the chance to say with our 2021 pledges: We want to be your sheep, and not your goats. We want to engage "kin-dom power" in our families, our community and our world. What will it take for us to come alive to our shared "kin-dom?" Grace and revelation can open before our eyes at any moment. And often it is a surprise. It was for all the nations judged as sheep or goats in Jesus' parable. And it was a surprise one day in a sleepy high-school English class. Hear how Frederick Buechner tells the story, "The scene takes place in a high-school English class where a group of seniors are being taught the play by a teacher who is himself the narrator of the scene. He describes it this way:

The Lear class had gone better than usual. It was the third act that was up for grabs that day—Lear on the beach with Kent and the Fool, the storm coming up—and nothing could have seemed more remote from our condition, yet there was a moment or two when for some reason it worked, came alive, no thanks to me. There they all sat drowsy and full of lunch. There was a gym class going on outside. You could hear somebody calling out calisthenics, one and two, and one, and two... I sat on the windowsill in my shirt sleeves asking some boring questions somebody had written in the margin of my teaching copy and wondering idly who had written them, and when, and not caring much whether anyone tried to answer them or not. "What evidence do you find in Act Three for a significant change in

Lear's character?" was one of the questions, and a freckle faced boy named William Urquhart surprised me by answering it. He was sitting all bent over with his head in his arms on the desk, and I'd thought he was asleep. His voice came out muffled by his arm. He said, "He's gotten kinder." I said, "What makes you think so?" The second question coming so quick on the heels of the one he'd just answered was more than William Urquhart had bargained for, and he shifted his head to the other arm without saying anything...

The ball was picked up by a boy named Greg Dixon. He was the pimpest member of the class and the least popular. He said, "Well, when it starts to rain, he thinks about the Fool keeping dry, too. He says it right here, someplace. 'Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy?' Here it is. He says, 'Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/ that's sorry yet for thee'. He's getting kinder to people, just like Urquhart said."

"Also, he says a prayer for people." It was Laura Fleischman who had spoken up this time... "Nobody says a prayer in my book," Greg Dixon said. That's not like any prayer I ever heard of. It doesn't even say God in it." I said, "Go ahead and read it out aloud will you, Laura,"

In a small, half-apologetic voice with the calisthenic count going on in the background she read; Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, That bid the pelting of this pitiless storm, How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you, From seasons such as these?... "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel," she read, "That thou may'st shake the superflux to them, And show the heavens more just." and two and one and two, the voice floated in through the open windows... I said, "Who are these poor naked wretches he's praying for, if she's right that he's praying? Greg Dixon said, "We are."

He said it to be funny—they were the poor naked wretches to have to sit there and listen to Laura Fleischman read blank verse when they could be off somewhere having whatever Greg Dixon thought of as fun—but nobody laughed. Maybe I just ascribed my own thought to them, but it seemed to me that for a moment or two in that sleepy classroom they all felt some unintended truth in Greg Dixon's words. Laura Fleischman in the fullness of her time. William Urquhart in his freckles. Greg Dixon with his pimples... They were the poor naked wretches, and at least for the moment they knew they were. All of us. The 'pitiless storm.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

If it could happen there in that sleepy English class, it can happen anywhere. It's not our job to separate the sheep and the goats. It's not our job to figure out when Christ is coming. It is our job, Apocalyptic, to stay awake and come alive to the *superflux*, to risk, and to build kin-dom power. From kings to naked wretches and back again. It is our job to call our human leaders to stand for Christ our King's vision. And nothing less. It is our job, naked wretches that we are, to be Christ's hands and feet.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (Random House: New York, NY, 1957).

ⁱⁱ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, quoted by Kate Ott, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY, 2020), p.508.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale*, (Harper & Row: San Francisco, CA, 1977), pp.26-30, excerpts.