
Today is *Christ the King Sunday*: the last Sunday of the liturgical year in which we celebrate the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The feast of Christ the King is a newcomer to the church's year, instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius IX. While the church had always celebrated the Kingship of Christ, it took 1925 years to see that we needed an explicit reminder. On the first celebration of Christ the King, Mussolini had been in power for a three years, Hitler had been out of prison and garnering momentum for the National Socialist Party in Germany, and the whole world lay in the midst of a great economic depression. Nevertheless, the church pronounced, Christ is King of the universe. In Will Willimon's words, "the feast became the church's great nevertheless to the godlessness of the modern world. I am actually going to make a change from what's printed in the bulletin – this year's lectionary text is from *Matthew 25:31-46*, and while we aren't a lectionary driven congregation, I found myself increasingly drawn to this text as the week wore on because it reminds us that the Kingship of Christ is of a fundamentally different order - a king who is concerned about the most vulnerable.

'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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 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." Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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." 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?" 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." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

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When he was about 50 years old, the great Russian Novelist Leo Tolstoy experienced a crisis in his life. He was living well - he was famous, enjoying the celebrity life, he was a public intellectual, well regarded by everyone and was near the end of writing *Anna Karenina*, but then in the midst of his success, he just hit the wall. It wasn't a mid-life crisis, but he says that he suddenly was brought to the edge of the abyss and saw emptiness. He was stopped in his tracks by the question, what am I doing anything for? If I'm going to die - why am I doing anything? Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death? Cheerful stuff, right?

In brief, this gave birth to a new direction in his work as an artist. In his short story called, *Where Love is, God is*, Tolstoy cuts to the heart of this morning's scripture lessons. The story is about a cobbler named Martin who we are told in the first page, loses his son, whom he loves dearly and, as a result, becomes extremely bitter toward God. In his grief he begins to "live for his own joy" carousing and abusing others. One day a monk visits him and asks why he is in such torment. Martin explains and then asks what can I do to escape the pain? The monk looks at him with compassion and says, do not live for yourself, live for God – for there you will find joy." Martin thinks of this advice, probably what any of us do: "how do I do that?" The monk's response is simple: "How one may live for God has been show for us by Christ. Can you read? Then buy the Gospels, and read them: there you will see how God would have you live. You have it all there."

So Martin buys a copy of the New Testament and he reads the story of the woman with the alabaster jar who anoints Jesus' feet with oil while the rich guest who invited Jesus in the first place doesn't so much as offer to wash his feet. He ponders this story and thinks to himself, "He must have been like me, that Pharisee. He too only thought of himself – how to get a cup of tea, how to keep warm and comfortable; never a thought of his guest. He took care of himself, but for his guest he cared nothing at all. Yet who was the guest? The Lord himself! If he came to me, should I behave like that?" And as he is thinking, these thoughts, he falls asleep.

Suddenly he hears a voice calling to him "Martin!" "Who's there?" he replies. He searches through the darkness, but sees no one. Then the voice calls again; "Martin! Look out in the street tomorrow, for I shall come." Confused and startled, the shoemaker wonders if he heard the words in a dream or while he was waking. He thinks to himself, will I really meet Christ tomorrow? But he dismisses the thought as fanciful.

The next morning as he is at his work he happens to glance out his window and he sees a number of people walk by. He notices their shoes, all familiar – some fancy, some well worn. Then he notices the shabby felt boots of an old soldier belonging to the elderly transient Stepanich. He sees the old man out in the snow shivering from cold, obviously hungry and for a while he continues about his work. After twelve or so stitches, he is compelled to look out the window again. "What if I called to him to give him some tea?" He invites Stepanich into the house and serves him food and hot tea to keep warm. Stepanich is effusive and teary in his thanks, before he goes Martin tells him to come again anytime. He smiles as he thinks of how foolish he was to expect Christ to come to him – it must have been a dream.

A little later he notices a young woman wearing only threadbare summer clothes carrying a small child with her. She nearly falls from exhaustion as she is passing on her way. Martin runs outside and welcomes her into his home, gives her food and clothing and money to purchase the shawl that she pawned in order to provide food for her child. She thanks him, crosses herself and heads out to the boarding house where she has found shelter. Martin goes back to his work and continues to look out the window looking for someone unfamiliar. After a while he sees an elderly woman with an apple cart struggling to make her way up to her home. Suddenly a boy comes and snatches an apple out from the cart, but the woman sees him and grips his coat. Martin runs outside to help. He frees the boy from the woman's grasp, but she cries out for justice. The boy says he didn't do anything, but Martin tells him to ask for forgiveness – he saw the whole episode from his window. The boy breaks down in tears and begs for her pardon, giving her back the apple and telling her he wouldn't have done it, but that he had no money for food. The woman remains unmoved, but Martin reminds her of the parable of the wicked servant who, when he was released

from an enormous debt that he could never repay, seizes upon another who owes him a small sum. He reminds the woman that she has been forgiven by God and who can repay God? We must forgive or we will not be forgiven. He buys the boy's apple from her and she is reminded of her own grandchildren and how difficult it would be if they were hungry. She forgives the boy and in his gratitude, the boy carries her apple cart home for her.

Martin goes back in his house, a little disappointed that he did not meet Christ like he thought he would. He returns to his gospel reading as he does every night, but does not read in the same place. Suddenly he hears the voice calling to him. "Martin, Martin, don't you know me?" and stepping out of the darkness of the room is a laughing Stepanich, and as quickly as he came, he vanishes. "It is I," says the voice again and out of the darkness steps the woman with the baby in her arms, smiling. And a third time, "It is I," and the old woman and the boy with the apple appear, smiling. Martin's heart grows glad at seeing these people, smiling at him. He crosses himself and continues his gospel reading. At the top of the page he reads.

"I hungered and you gave me food: I thirsted, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger and you took me in...inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these my bretheren, you did it unto me". Tolstoy concludes, "and Martin understood that his dream had come true; and that the Savior had really come to him that day, and he had welcomed him."

The climax of Jesus' teaching in Matthew describes the Son of Man coming in all of his glory, and the nations are gathered before him, for he is a king. He is moreover, a compassionate king with a heart for the poor and who executes justice, separating the righteous from the unrighteous. It's significant in the parable that the righteous are unaware that they have done ministry. Like Martin they go throughout their days ministering and providing hospitality unaware of the fact that they are in fact welcoming the king.

The thing that strikes me about Tolstoy's story is that his protagonist does not believe that his acts of mercy are a strategy to care for the poor to be put in place until a better social policy can be enacted. He has a change of heart, occasioned by an encounter with Christ in the scriptures that allows him to see acts of mercy as the very way that Jesus has given his people for the renewal of the world.

The way that Jesus has given us is so ordinary, so remarkably inefficient. The parable is scandalous because it challenges our assumption that the best way to do something for the poor, the naked, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned is by trying to create structures and policies that minimize the likelihood of poverty, famine, illness, and crime. The problem with these alternatives is that we seduce ourselves into believing that we are working to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and those in prison without ever coming into contact with someone who is hungry, naked, thirsty, a stranger, sick, or in prison.

What if this parable isn't really about doing things largely and efficiently at all? What if it is about doing simple things? Jesus doesn't say to the righteous - "you ended world hunger, well done." Ending world hunger would be wonderful, but if we make that our goal and we make ourselves busy and important and a little bit crazy spending all of our time debating whether genetically-altered foods is the best approach or whether we should be negotiating pathways for agricultural innovation in traditional agrarian societies - we might be so busy discussing these things that we forget Jesus says to the righteous, "*You* gave me something to eat." The parable doesn't end with, "You provided clean and accessible drinking water for the whole world." That would be a

worthy global campaign, and I am particularly impressed by organizations that do so on a small scale, but while researching which NGO would provide the most efficient and cost effective water filtration system, and convincing congress to pursue diplomatic solutions we can forget the words “*You* gave me a drink.” Each of these six acts of mercy are simple enough for everyone. “When I was sick you visited me.” Jesus doesn’t say, you cured me. The parable doesn’t say, you pursued a Ph.D. in bio-chemistry in order to develop a miracle-drug. That’s fantastic work, but the story places things within our reach. The story says, “You visited me.” The same for prisons. No one will argue that there’s not plenty wrong with our criminal justice system. And it’s a noble calling to be a lawyer or an advocate seeking to address those wrongs. But the story says, “I was in prison and you visited me.”

You don’t need to be a person with position, status or importance to be Jesus’ disciple. If you’re a middle or high school student, the question is not, “are you going to live up to your potential and fulfill the obligation brought about by your social status by making a lot of money?” the question is, “even if you do make a lot of money, are you also going to be the kind of person who cares for your sick friend and feeds the hungry?”

We might say, but “I still struggle with knowing you’re really there and having much idea what you’re really up to.” Like Martin in Tolstoy’s story, we might find it hard to believe that an encounter with Christ is waiting for us. But Jesus comes aside and says, “Hey, let me make it easy for you. You know anyone sick? That’s where to find me. You know anyone hungry or homeless or in prison? Maybe not: - but you know where to find them, don’t you? Well, that’s where I’ll be.” If we are finding Jesus hard to find, he has given us a calling card. If we’re wondering how to follow him, we may simply follow him to the hospital. Care for the sick. Feed the hungry. Don’t make it harder than it is. But we prefer to make it a whole lot more complicated. We’d rather read a book on the absence of God or the failure of Christianity than go to the places Jesus has told us we can find him. The kingdom of God shows up in person - it comes to us in the form of the hungry, the homeless and the prisoner. But we find it too uncomfortable, and keep away. And then we ask why we can’t seem to feel close to God.

While the creation of safety nets and social systems can be an important means of meeting real human need, they can also be the very means by which we insulate and place barriers between ourselves and the very people who bear Christ’s image. So often we spend our energies attempting to create a better world, but Jesus is interested in creating a people capable of offering compassionate care. The two are not always the same.

This week we are getting ready to host our CARITAS guests. I’ve always appreciated that this is one of the ways that our congregation takes Jesus seriously at his word. I want to leave you with something practical. Get involved. For those of you who are involved, take the time to hear, really hear someone else’s story. Take the time to tell your own. It may be painful and it may strip away some of the insulation that we wrap ourselves in - without which we might feel a bit exposed and naked and ready to encounter Christ.

Amen.