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Fourth Presbyterian Church
Christ the King Sunday
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It All Comes to This

Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

I must confess that for most of my ministry

I have carefully avoided preaching on this passage.

Not only are there so many interpretive challenges

with this end-time vision of Jesus' separating the sheep from the goats,

but there are immediate, real-world problems with applying it

that do not lend themselves to easy resolution.

But here we are on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian year,

having just stuffed ourselves full to the point of discomfort on Thanksgiving Day,

and maybe again on leftovers the day after,

and then distracted ourselves from any responsibility for the hungry,

who might benefit from the Day 3 leftovers still in the fridge,

by watching 12 hours straight of college football on TV.

What preacher, really, after such a holiday of Thanksgiving for our blessings,

in which we spend meaningful time, and sometimes even enjoyable time,

with family and friends —

what preacher wants to come crashing in with these words of judgment?

But at the end of the day, at the end of every holiday, and at the end of all things,

it all comes to this:

Jesus Christ is Lord, the King of Kings,

and he is exalted to the throne of heaven,

and at the last, we will stand before him,

and we will see in ourselves what he always sees in us,

all that we have done in this life, and all that we have failed to do,

and we will be held to account for it.

So before we settle into the soft glow of Christmas lights and nativity scenes

we would do well to remember that this is our sure and certain future.

There will be a day of reckoning.

Still, part of my reticence about this passage is to know what exactly it means for us,
day in and day out.

*'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...

*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.'*

So I'm standing at the Spinx station pumping gas,
and the moment she slips through the pumps from the other side,
I know what's coming.
I can see it in the worry lines on her face
and something about her clothes says chronic desperation.
There will be a sad story first and then an ask.
She and her friend are running on fumes and they have to get to Easley.
Could I give her just a few dollars for gas?
I pull out my wallet and show her that I'm flat out of cash,
but flashing from the brown leather is the bright blue of my credit card,
which is clearly how I'm about to pay for my own gas right there at the pump.
So I finish up my own tank,
walk around and swipe my card for her and her friend and pump \$10 worth of gas,
wondering how much they've spent on the cigarettes
that can be smelled even over the fumes of the gas pump.
I am both irritated that I was caught, but also now feeling a little saintly for helping.
They are thanking me profusely.
Though as I drive off, I am already figuring out what I will say
the next time I'm trapped between a needy person and my Christian conscience:
How about, "I helped last time,
so I get a couple of passes before it's my turn again."

Sheep and goats never entered my consciousness at the time.
There was no sense of the mystical presence of Jesus.
But I wonder what Jesus would think of my new planned line of excuse.

The needs are all around us; not always so face to face, but always there.
Every time I check out at Publix now, I am asked if I'd like to donate.
Sometimes I do, but most times I don't. I go to Publix a lot!
I have perfected my least awkward decline: "Not this time, thanks."
Sounds like I give more often than not.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable are the people who come to the doors of the church,
or who call on the phone, ready to tell their story and ask for some cash.
Our best response — and truly the most helpful —
is to say we give to United Ministries,
and to point them in that direction for help,
considerably more effective help than any handout we might give.

As long as there have been churches,
the truly needy, as well as the system schemers, have come to our doors.
Even at the Vatican in Rome, the beggars line the side walks just outside the vatican wall.
Location, location, location!
Their message to the tourists passing by could not be more clear.
Question is: are they vessels of God's message to us?

Is the woman in rags, lying prostrate, with hands outstretched,
outside the Pope's residence, Christ himself?

The dilemma is real:

We cannot help everyone. We do not have either the money or the time.
Besides, who can tell if the money will help them eat,
or just help them buy a bottle of cheap wine?¹

Nevertheless, Jesus is on the throne of heaven.
And the day of the separation is coming.
What am I doing for the least of these.
It all comes to this in the end.

But before we can begin to apply this passage to daily life in Greenville, SC, in the 21st century,
there are plenty of 1st century questions to sort through:

Two questions about this text need to be answered:

- 1) Who exactly are "*all the nations*"
who will be gathered before the throne of the Son of Man?
- 2) And who exactly are "*the least of these, members of Christ's family*?"

Answers to the first question, Who are *all the nations*, have been varied:

All the nations could be...

- ...All Christians
- ...All Christians who are alive when Christ returns;
but these options are unlikely,
because the same phrase occur elsewhere in Matthew
and, in those places, clearly includes non-Christians.

Others have suggests that *all the nations* refers to

- ...All non-Christians
- ...All non-Jews who are also not Christians
so that this scene becomes a way of dealing with
those who have not embraced Christ in faith or accepted his baptism;
except maybe for the Jews, who are covered under the first covenant.

Finally, many understand *all the nations* to be *all humanity*,
as in, everyone will be there — all of us — and we will all be subject to this separation.

The problem with this last, most prevalent interpretation, is twofold:

- It subjects Christians to the same standard as non-Christians;
namely, salvation according to deeds of mercy performed;
that is, there is no Pauline notion of salvation by grace through faith here.
- Secondly, it clearly allows for merciful non-Christians to be granted salvation
and for unmerciful Christians not to be.

This obviously is a most disconcerting interpretation for Christians.
It is, nonetheless, the best option.

After all, Calvin always argued that our good works —
our deeds of mercy, in this case —
are the good fruit of the good tree,
or signs that we actually have faith in Christ.

But to make *all the nations* inclusive of non-Christians definitely leads to the idea
that some will be saved because they lived as Christians are supposed to live
even though they never once professed faith in Christ,
or what theologian Karl Rahner called, “anonymous Christians.”

And why should we object? It was Jesus who said,
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

And the **second big question** is:

Who exactly are *‘the least of these, members of Christ’s family’*?

Are they...

...Everyone in need?

...Or are they Christian disciples who are suffering persecution in Matthew’s day?

...Or Christian missionaries who are traveling around doing Christ’s work?

But thinking of the least of these as only Christians, is problematic.

Could Matthew, in his day,
really have thought that every human everywhere
would have the opportunity to show mercy to a Christian disciple or missionary?

So it seems the best option is the universal one:

the least of these who are members of my family
refers to anyone and everyone in need.

So *all the nations* means every human being.

**Every human being will be gathered for this final reckoning
by the exalted Christ.**

And *the least of these who are members of my family* means anyone and everyone in need.

**Any and every human being we encounter who is in need
is the embodiment of the living Christ right before our eyes.²**

If we linger for a while longer with this disturbing scene and its implication,
we find that it is animated at a deeper level
by a fascinating set of paradoxes.

The first paradox is in Christ himself,
who appears *in his glory, and all the angels with him,*
sitting on the throne of his glory,

and yet who also appears present and visible
in the least of these members of his family,
the poor and weak and vulnerable,
those who are everything the exalted Christ is not.

And it could be that this central paradox
invites us to ponder our own paradoxical relationship to this scene.

Perhaps we cannot be too single-minded in understanding the last judgment.

When taken in the broader context of the New Testament
we are reminded that
“Christians are always both recipients of the gospel
and witnesses to it.

Each of us is both unbeliever
and believer,
both commanded to care
and in need of care,
both judged by the Son of Man
and identified with him in our weakness,
both under judgment for our failures to pursue justice
and saved by grace,
both a goat
and a sheep.”³

Appreciation of such paradox

“may remind us not to assume too much about ourselves,
our places in this text, our relations to our neighbors,
or our places in eternity.”⁴

In fact, it seems that the point of this vision of judgment
is to turn our eyes away from ourselves
and toward our neighbor,
and to find some connection with our neighbor
that compels us to break down the walls of separation we are so keen to build,
and instead to reach out in compassion,
especially if that neighbor in some way
has been pushed to the margins.

It all comes to this. Compassion. Love of the neighbor. Especially the needy one.

It seems that another point of this vision —
and a point sorely needed for people of faith
in these days in which the power politics of our land
seem to be utterly void of any moral compass;
and in these days when we might wonder
whether good deeds have good consequences
in any final and lasting sense —

Matthew's vision of the last judgment insists that
"beyond the injustice and disorder of this world
is the order and justice of another,
which fact guarantees that the actions — even ordinary actions —
of human beings matter and have consequences:
people are truly responsible.

It is faith in this moral order, and that things one day will be put right,
that inspires our imagination now
to see what God is still up to
to see the good God is still calling us to do
in this midst of the chaos
that is human history.⁵

It all comes to this. But the end has not come yet.

And so another liturgical year draws to a close,
with our eyes turned upward to the exalted Jesus, our King and Sovereign.

But the exalted Christ we worship,
turns our eyes back by his almighty hand...

...turns us back once again to earth,

...back to the lowly, to the humble, to the needy,
hidden from our sight in the dark.

And in the dark, God-with-us, Immanuel,
appears in one of his many guises...
...and soon we will adore him again
in the arms of a poor mother and father
in the humility of a Bethlehem stable.

God with us, unexpectedly,
and calling for our love.

¹ John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 332

² Discussion of interpretive options for Matthew 25 are drawn from Dale Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, in the *International Critical Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 416ff.

³ Mark Douglas, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 336

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Allison, 432