

Matthew 25:31-46

‘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.’

Did you notice anything surprising about the goats and the sheep?

What is interesting is that both groups are surprised that Christ identified himself with “the least of these”. One group did feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visited the imprisoned and more. But they didn’t see it as significant. And the other group, who did not do those things, didn’t think it was significant either. So both groups were surprised that Jesus so closely identified himself with the hurting.

Jesus equated himself with those who were hungry, thirsty, a person in a strange land, a person in need of clothing, or people who were sick and in prison.

So, this passage points out that God regularly shows up in places, and with people that we don’t expect God to be that interested in. Remember that each group gave no thought regarding their treatment of “the least of these” and are surprised to discover that their actions (or lack of action) mattered because it never crossed their minds that God was present in “the least of these”. They gave no thought that their behavior, or lack of it, would have such extreme ramifications to them on the other side of the grave.

Another way to think about “the least of these” is that they represent those who do not matter, those to whom society gives little thought, and those whom we may even dislike. Yet, Christ identifies himself with them.

One of the central teachings of Luther’s theology is “the theology of the cross”. It means that God regularly and surprisingly shows up where we least expect God to be. The theology of the cross proclaims that God is found in suffering.

Next Sunday is the beginning of Advent where we will find God appearing, not in Jerusalem or Rome, but in the little insignificant village of Bethlehem. Not with armor and sword, but in the vulnerable flesh of a baby. Not in conquest but in crucifixion. Not in power, but in weakness. Again and again, God in Jesus Christ shows up where we least expect God to be.

There is no doubt that this passage invites us to look through another lens to see the presence of God. Today we celebrate that Christ is King, but his reign is difficult to see because it isn’t where we so often look.

It is important to remember that a sacrament is a physical thing that mediates God’s presence. In Baptism, it is water. In Holy Communion it is bread and wine.

Today's gospel suggests that perhaps we can add a third sacrament - God is present in those who are hungry, thirsty, in those who are poorly clothed, sick, or a stranger and with those in prison. Service given to people in need, and advocating compassion and justice for those experiencing oppression, is a place where we can find Christ, if we are interested in finding him.

It is not what we normally expect from almighty God, but neither is his child born in a stable and in poverty.

So, one way of viewing this passage is to see our work on behalf of "the least of these" as important, and perhaps even sacramental, because it mediates the real presence of Christ.

Christ is not only present in the plight of those mentioned in the Gospel, but he is also present in abused animals and abused creation, waiting for his followers to bring mercy compassion and justice. Wherever we find suffering, we will find the presence of Christ, when we give of ourselves to bring compassion and justice.

We might extend this insight to those whom we disagree with theologically or politically. During this time of uncertainty and turbulence in our society, perhaps today's passage is calling us to take a moment to wonder whether God is present among those with whom disagree, or perhaps, even hate.

If truth be told, there is some of the sheep and goat in all of us. As Luther taught, we are simultaneously saint and sinner.

Perhaps the sheep and goat parts of our souls can learn to love each other. The more we feast on love, the more the goat parts of our nature are redeemed, and we are able to discern Christ's presence more clearly in our world.

This is not a call to surrender one's convictions. Rather, it is a call to work for mercy and justice, while remembering that God often shows where we would least expect.

It is true that whenever we draw a line between who's in and who's out, we find Jesus on the other side.

That is comforting because it shows how inclusive and expansive God's love is.

Amen.