

*On this last Sunday of the Christian year we think about how Christ is king in the context of Matthew 25 and its picture of God as found in our relationships with the other, especially the one in need or experiencing alienation.*

What can we learn from this scripture  
that can carry us through our lives – not just as faithful Christians -  
but as participants in the possibilities – for building peace and justice and abundant life?

Are we willing to let this teaching into our lives – and live it –  
even though it goes counter to much about life – now and back then?

I do believe that if we read no other – except the Sermon on the Mount -  
we have the center of the Gospel –  
the message of Jesus and his life – right here in Matthew 25.

It is all there and it is very clear.

It is not so much about what we do – as when we don't do it.

It's about what we don't do -  
and because of what we do not do – how we miss (let's call it) the connection we are destined to  
make – or just call it “the god experience” – what many used to call salvation.

The thing we are also asked to do today is think about Christ as King -  
on this last Sunday of the Christian year. Next week we begin again with Advent.

We are not a people that take very much to kings –  
for we threw off the reign of King George of England at the very outset.

But Elvis – now there was a king that we liked.

We might cater to a king of rock or a king of soul – such as James Brown.  
It is another kind of king of soul that we think of today - perhaps a king for our souls.

To what are we drawn to enrich our lives and save us from ourselves?

To whom are we drawn to find peace in our hearts?

I believe these are the questions. That would be a way to say it today.

This scripture is about judgment.

We United Methodists don't talk about judgment much.

But Matthew 25 won't let us avoid it any longer.

Here it is – big and bold.

Jesus does not talk much about judgment but he does paint this picture.

Have you ever wondered (don't raise your hands)  
if you will ever have to answer for something in your life?

Remember that God's care embraces all things –  
but it is clear that our creator has special concern for people experiencing hunger,  
thirst, captivity, illness, poverty, and alienation.

We are not to make distinctions between fellow citizen and stranger.

God cares for the "least of these" and calls us to do likewise.  
God and neighbor are sometimes – or maybe always – the same.  
It is about ethics, economics, politics and individual generosity. <sup>1</sup>

The words,

"as you did it to one of the least of these  
who are members of my family - you did it to me" -

This is God's relationship to the world.

That tells us something about God.

God experiences – feels – loves - engages with us.

So, this would mean that when we hurt another, God experiences the pain.

We shape God's experience by our actions and attitudes.

What we do matters because God feels everything.

God used to be seen as far away – not subject to feeling – omnipotent.

That is what early theologians wrote. But that was not God. That was Caesar.

That attitude came about to create something beyond the omnipotent –  
and oppressive Caesar -

that dominated the lives of the people – the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans – anyone around.

No, that's not God - and that is what percolates out of these gospels for us to see.

What we do matters because God feels everything - embraces our pain – our loneliness –  
our desolation when it is there –  
and is connected within you - and within me - and between you and me.

And, I expect we will not find peace in this world until we have a better grasp  
on “the least of these” – because that is where it takes us.  
I expect we will not find peace (they used to call it salvation)  
until we get a grasp on ourselves and the other and how God is mixed up in it.



He had his messengers post signs in every town and village

There is an Irish legend about a king – who had no children to succeed him on the throne. inviting  
qualified young men - to apply for an interview with the king.  
This is the way the king hoped to be able to choose a successor before he died.

Two qualifications:

The person must have a deep love for God – and a deep love for neighbor.

A young man saw one of the signs.

He had a deep love for God and neighbor –  
and he felt an inner voice telling him to apply for an interview.

But the young man was poor and didn't have decent clothes to wear to an interview -  
or the money to buy provisions for the long journey to the king's castle.

So the young man prayed over the matter –  
and decided to go out and beg for the clothes and the provisions he needed.

When everything was ready – he set out.

Many days later the young man caught sight of the king's castle – high on a hill in a distance.

At about the same time – he also caught sight of a beggar sitting by the side of the road.

The beggar held out his hands and pleaded for help.

“I'm hungry and cold,” he said in a weak voice.

“Could you give me something warm to wear and something to eat?”

The young man was moved – and he stripped off his warm outer clothes  
and exchanged them for the tattered coat of the beggar.

He also gave the beggar most of the provisions  
he had been carrying in his backpack for the return journey.

Then, somewhat uncertainly, he walked on to the castle in the tattered clothes.

When he arrived – the guards met him at the gate.

They took him to the visitors' area.

And after a long wait he was led in to see the king.

He bowed low before the throne.

When he straightened up, the young man could hardly believe his eyes.

He said the king, "You were the beggar beside the road."

"That's right," said the king.

"Why did you do this to me?" asked the young man.

The king said, "I had to find out if you really did love God and neighbor."

And then the king told him he had proved himself – and was the new heir. <sup>2</sup>



This story has been told in many ways.

I guess it has a truth to it that is too enduring to be lost.

Learned perhaps from Jesus – maybe other traditions.

That where we meet God is usually not where we had planned.

No, it's usually on the edge somewhere – on the edges of life –

where our truth is told in what we do and do not do.



I think it comes down to being willing to be human in an environment of vulnerability -

realizing that our humanity is bound up in the other's humanity.

My humanity is bound up with the street person

who comes repeatedly to the church office for a grocery coupon or bus pass –

or to the shelter for another night out of the cold.

My humanity is bound up with the humanity of the terrorist – even if he wants to kill me.

My humanity is bound up with the child in Darfur whose hopes have no where to go  
when the water runs out or HIV takes her mother.

My humanity is bound up with the illegal alien risking life and limb  
once again to cross the Texas border to find work.

Our humanity is bound up in the other's humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, that is what it is about. Now what are we to do?

Matthew 25 would tell us to enter into the places we fear.

We United Methodists are already doing some of it.

Our volunteers in mission teams – from Colorado to Kansas and Kentucky or Louisiana,  
or the elementary school in Kenya, or building Africa University

in the Highlands of Zimbabwe now graduating students  
in government, agriculture, the church, education, business and medicine.

It may just be 4 cents out of every dollar you give – but it adds up.

And our offerings for the United Methodist Committee on Relief –  
which is now able to go back into Cuba after the recent hurricanes  
and help people put their lives back together.

When we enter into the world of others – we enter into the world of God -  
whether in Aspen and this valley or around the world.

I expect that is not all of it.

I expect we are each called to enter into the world of God through some quiet voice –  
calling us somewhere-

like the young man heard before he set off on his journey to visit the king.

Pay attention to it. Respond to it.

It could mean everything - even though it may be unsettling.

It will call you out of your comfort zone.

But it will bring you in touch with the nature of God and Matthew 25.

It will take you to the heart of what it means to call ourselves Christian.

It will take us to the heart of what we mean by calling Christ king.

And, ultimately, it will call us to happiness.

*The Least of These* – based on Matthew 25:31-46  
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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Bruce Epperly, *Process and Faith*

<sup>2</sup> An ancient story adapted from Billy D. Strayhorn in *Blessed to Be a Blessing*

<sup>3</sup> Michael Battle, *The Other Kingdom*