

**The Lessons Appointed for Use
on
Year A**



Last Sunday after Pentecost

Christ the King

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Matthew 25:31-46

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, “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.”

SERMON

I need to make a little confession here. I don't relate very well to the "or else" passages in the Bible. I know that I should. I know that it's important to recognize that there are limits, and there are.

Jesus said, "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.

but...I keep thinking that if I try to live a life that reflects the Gospel because it will benefit me, it just pulls the rug out from under everything. I should be relating to others out of love for them, rather than from a posture of "what's in it for me?" Going at it that way makes every good thing I do feel like I'm paying a premium on a life insurance policy. I just can't relate positively to the idea of the Gospel as a business transaction. If we're to bring the love of God into His creation, it seems to me that we should do it by increasing the store of love of neighbors in ourselves and then teaching others to do likewise. That's what I think. What I hear is an awful lot of me, me, me. There seems to be an awful lot of people today speaking of "my rights". When Lee Greenwood sang:

And I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free

For many people, "at least I know I'm free" means "free to do anything I want" because that's "my right" as an American, no matter how it impacts those around me. Well, boys and girls, that is not the teaching of Jesus in this passage.

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.'

Jesus teaches that we are obligated to everyone, even the least of these, for they are members of God's family, and no, you don't get to decide who is and who is not in God's family! That's another arrogance we swallow entirely too easily.

In this miserable year of 2020, we're getting a good opportunity to see how treating everyone as a part of God's family works out, courtesy of the blessing we call Covid 19. And yes, I did that on purpose to wake you up. Our enemy is our blindness to the words of Jesus and the way we defeat this enemy is just as Jesus taught and Governor Beshear teaches four times a week. "We'll get through this. We'll get through this together". Recognizing all people as children of God's family and protecting them as we protect members of our own family is the only way we can defeat the virus. To our shame, working through a challenge like Covid 19 will require skills we have allowed to wither. We will learn, as we travel through this plague, how to re-energize the power we once knew, but have now forgotten.

I grew up as a part of the first post-World War II generation. Most of the adult males I knew had seen service against the atrocity of National Socialism, the Nazis. We brought an end to that horror by banding together against it to protect our neighbors, even the least of them. It was before I was born, so I don't know how much whining there was about "my rights" but the general consensus was that co-operation for the sake of the welfare of all of us trumps concerns about our own welfare. The watchword was, "I will work and sacrifice, even lay down my own life, so that a country founded on the notion that all men are guaranteed the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness should continue, for such a country, flawed as it is, reflects a commitment to the good of everyone."

This recognition that we are each responsible for the welfare of others led us to the victory in World War II. This same recognition led us to the idea of Social Security – that when one has labored for a lifetime and has become less able to provide for himself, it is the responsibility of the community to look after him, lest he starve. In Jesus' words,

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.’

We are each given into the hands of our neighbors and there is an absolute requirement that we be faithful to the responsibility given us because the weakness of each of us, the infirmities we suffer, the hunger that is felt is no less than the suffering of Jesus. We did it once. We can do it again. Why is wearing a mask so challenging? The victory in World War II SHOULD have taught us a lesson on the value of pulling together for the benefit of all. We should have learned that unity of purpose against the suffering of others can bring about a more perfect world for all. We seem to have learned the opposite – that I get to do anything I want because I have rights. Such an arrogance is an abomination. We will get through this. We will get through this together because there is no other way to do it. God is granting us a time of reflection in the form of the Covid 19 virus, but that does not change the fact that there is an “or else” if we fail to love one another for while we have dithered, 250,000 funerals have been held. This virus will devastate us unless we relearn the lessons of the Gospel, that we are each given into the hands of the other to love and be cared for.

I spent 25 years serving up the “or else” to people who had offended the law. There was a certain sense of satisfaction in seeing a defendant led off in cuffs to begin his or her sentence of confinement. Somewhere in my sinful heart, I celebrated that the defendant was “getting what he deserved”. I couldn’t have been more wrong. In my time with you I have learned that what the defendant, a child of God’s family, deserved was my

love and kindness to find a way through the traps of addiction or abandonment which had fueled his offense against the law.

Don't be the fool I was. Listen to the teaching of Jesus. If you just will insist on seeing God's creation through a lens of "us" and "them", if you will refuse to acknowledge that all are children of the same God, then you have imprisoned others into a jailhouse of your own construction. That is not your calling.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Remember, church, “Until the power of love exceeds the love of power, there can be no peace on earth.”

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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