

11.26.2023 Christ the King

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

“The Servant King”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The last Sunday of the church year is always a day that looks across time into God’s future for humanity. We reckon time as both the span and duration of our lives as well as God’s “moments” of in-breaking into our lives. And so, on this last day of the church year, we are reminded of what it means to be Christians, the church in the world. We remember Jesus the Good Shepherd who gathers and cares for the sheep, and the “servant king” who emptied himself of all power, becoming a servant in this world, obedient even to death on a cross.

In today’s reading from the prophet Ezekiel, God says he himself will be the shepherd who will gather, feed, and seek out the lost sheep. On Christ the King Sunday, we remind ourselves of who Jesus is and who Jesus calls us to be as the church. He is the Good Shepherd, and we are also called to be merciful and compassionate shepherds, gathering and feeding the lost and the weak.

Today’s readings offer us a vision of human leadership and human strength that is different from the world. In this vision of leadership, the strong are to help the weak, not for selfish gain or power, but in caring for and protecting those who are oppressed. Ezekiel and Jesus remind us that in God’s sight all people have value, and Jesus calls them, “*the least of these*” – the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Jesus calls them “*members of my family.*”

In today’s reading from Ezekiel, God says he will set King David over the people of Israel as a shepherd who feeds and cares for the people. This vision of the “Good Shepherd” is not simply a spiritual metaphor, but a worldly vocation against which all who would lead must aspire to and grapple with. Using the example of King David, God is declaring that all kings and leaders have a vocation and responsibility to care for those entrusted to them. True leadership is not about pushing and abusing the weakest; leaders do not scatter their flock; rather, like the Good Shepherd, they are to gather, feed, and care for them.

Today’s gospel builds upon Matthew’s lineage of Jesus. At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel Jesus’ lineage is traced from Abraham through King David, thereby promising him to be shepherd and servant king of all people. Today’s gospel draws upon these images, helping us to envision a life of faith and service to “the least of these” who are members of Jesus’ family.

Today’s gospel parable about the sheep and goats is a vision for the ministry of Christ’s

church, and it is a vision of Christ's judgment of the nations. All the nations will be gathered before the Son of Man, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will put the sheep at his right hand, saying, "*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... 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.*"

No parable, except perhaps the Good Samaritan, reveals with greater clarity the shape of servanthood. No parable challenges more honestly any who would call themselves Christian toward service for others. In this parable, Christ's judgment of us will not depend upon the knowledge we have amassed, the content of our resumes, the fame we have acquired, or the wealth we possess. Christ's judgment will depend solely upon how we have treated the weakest and the most vulnerable members of Jesus' family.

Yet in the parable, those who are called righteous seem genuinely surprised. They have simply acted compassionately for others. They have not acted for gain, power, or reward. They have acted only for their neighbor, "*the least of these.*" Upon asking the king, "*Lord, when did we see you?*" the king replies, "*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.*"

Such selfless service for others causes me to ask: Can you serve others when the world tells you they have no value? Can you welcome others when the world tells you they are strangers and different? Can you care for others when the world says they do not belong among us? This is what we are called to do as Christians and as a church. When the worship is over, our service begins. It is in daily life that Jesus will say to us, "*You did it to me.*"

In today's installation of the Congregation Council these words spoken to them stand out: "*You are to be examples of faith active in love...*" Faith is given to us in order that we might act boldly with love for others. This is who God is: God is self-giving and caring love. Our faith is to be active in loving service for others. This self-giving love is the love that Jesus commands of all who would follow him.

The phrase "to lose oneself in their work" is often used to describe someone who gives all of themselves to their work. This helps me understand those righteous ones who seem genuinely surprised, saying, "*Lord, when did we see you?*" Jesus' call to humanity "to deny themselves" and

follow him, is a call to forget ourselves in service to others. This is the hiddenness of faith in our lives. Faith is the power of grace hidden but active through love in our lives. By denying ourselves in loving service to our neighbor, we come to say, *“Lord, when did we see you?”*

Baptism is the promise of God’s free and unconditional grace to a weak and vulnerable humanity. Nowhere is God’s unconditional grace and love seen more clearly than in the baptism of a baby, who can do nothing for themselves. God acts with love that transforms us, filling us with the presence of God in Christ. Today we welcome Charles Hall Molan through Holy Baptism into the church, which is the body of Christ. As Paul writes, Christ’s body the church is *“the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* It is my prayer that Christ will fill Charles Hall Molan with *“faith active in love,”* that he might grow into loving service for his neighbor, in a world in dire need of people who care for one another.

*“Lord, when did we see you?”* means doing good when no one is looking but Jesus Christ. Over and over, we give, help, and serve, until this is all that we do. May your faith always be active in love. The grace of faith which is given to you in Baptism is the power to live for others.

One day in the future, we will all stand before Christ, asking, *“Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty; a stranger or naked; sick or in prison?”*

The Servant King will look at us, and say, *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.”* Amen.