

Ezekiel 34: 11-24
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25: 31-46

When Was It That We Saw You
November 23, 2014
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On the bulletin this morning, you will see the words “Thanksgiving Sunday.” This is a bit of a misnomer: on the Church calendar, there is no such thing as Thanksgiving Sunday – Thanksgiving is a national, not a religious holiday...and then, really, every Sunday is an opportunity for giving thanks. But, let it stand. If we turn to the church calendar, today is called “Christ the King Sunday” or, if you prefer inclusive language “Reign of Christ Sunday.” When I was in seminary, I had a professor of ethics who did not like king or kingdom language. He said that it no longer applied to our modern understandings of power and governance. Instead of “The Kingdom of God,” he preferred “God’s Federal Republic.” What do you think? How does that ring in your ears? I suppose that we would have to alter the Lord’s Prayer to say, “Thy Federal Republic come, thy will be done.” What do you think? Should we change the way we pray?

I am being a bit facetious, but the issue remains: we don't often think in terms of kings or kingdoms as everyday things anymore, the way they would have been centuries ago. So, inclusive language reaches for the word “reign,” as in a ruler reigns over us. But does that resolve the issue. In our capitalistic, democratic society we do not think in terms of kingdoms or reigns. The word “nation” is not good either. When I think of our systems, our conceptual framework, I wonder whether “culture” might help us think about this. I am not going to re-name the day, but, just for the time being, let’s imagine that today is “Culture of Christ” Sunday.

This might be useful because our culture changes, not only over time, but from place to place. The Culture Of Christ might be a yardstick by which to measure how to live faithfully today, as opposed to in Israel in the time of Ezekiel, or in Galilee in the time of Jesus, or in Ephesus in the time of Paul. This is precisely how the first Christians used the phrases “The Kingdom of God” or “Jesus is Lord” (the first baptismal confession.) It was a refusal to accept the earthly king or emperor or lord as the final arbiter or the last word in obedience or judgment. There is a higher calling, and each sub-culture has to discern its own path, its own way of living out the call.

The Gospel reading today, with its description of the judgment of sheep and goats, tells us how the first century Christians understood life in the culture of Christ: feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the prisoner. In every generation since then, this has been the template for serving Jesus in the world. Many stories have been written with this parable as inspiration. One of my favorites is Tolstoy’s *Martin the Cobbler* also called “Where Love Is, God Is.” You should read it sometime. The main character meditates on Scripture in the Christmas season, and offers charity to an old veteran who sweeps the street, to a young, starving single mother and her baby, and to an old grandmother who sells apples. In his culture, in his corner of the world, that was where he encountered Christ: in those people, in those lives. And we still live this out, here, today, within our culture. We cook dinners at the Listen Center, we invest in projects to bring potable water to developing villages, we reach out to refugees from Cambodia and Bosnia, we send children’s clothing to the Dominican Republic, we take care of the sick at home and in our medical centers, we eat supper with former prisoners at

Dismas House. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we have taken the advice of this parable very seriously. We open our eyes to those who suffer. Whether we actually expect to see the face of Jesus in those we serve, something motivates us to do these things.

Today I want us to ask ourselves again: in our culture: who is suffering? What does the “cup of water” look like to them? It is partly a matter of discerning, creatively, how life is different in the 21st century, and then how, creatively, we respond.

A few days ago I was speaking to a local Methodist minister who had visited the First United Methodist Church of Miami as part of a clergy group. The First Methodist Church of Miami is very different from this place. First of all, it’s a new building, made of cement, like a cinderblock in downtown Miami. If you like white clapboards and classical architecture, you would be disappointed. It is not in a residential neighborhood. The people you see on the street are visitors and homeless people. Half the people who come to worship on any given Sunday are visitors, traveling through Miami. So they don’t try to get guests to come back, because they are not going to come back and join the church: this is a one shot deal. How does a church in that setting find community and purpose? Well, the First United Methodist Church of Miami has found a wonderful way to live in the culture of Christ. 21 years ago, when they held a foot washing service on a Maundy Thursday evening, they washed the feet of some homeless men as part of the ritual, acting on Jesus’ command at his Last Supper. This grew from worship to mission. Now, every Maundy Thursday, they wash the feet of hundreds of homeless people. They give them new socks and shoes to put on their clean feet. They have podiatrists come from Barry University attend to the needs of each one. In their place, in their corner of God’s world, they have found a way to “see” Christ in the least of these.

Another story, one that I heard on the radio recently, one that could only happen in our time, with our technology. And the suffering is not one on the parable’s list. There are people who are unable to speak, and rely on computerized devices to communicate. The scientist Stephen Hawking is perhaps the most famous of these, and some of you may have heard that rather flat computer voice saying some amazing things that come out of his amazing brain. And, guess what, the exact same voice is used by most people without speech, millions of people, young, old, male, female. A woman name Rupal Patel started company called VocaliD to give a person who cannot speak a more human, individual voice. There are speech donors, whose voices are recorded, and then blended and manipulated to create a hybrid synthetic voice that conveys as much of the recipient’s vocal identity as possible. I watched a video online of a teenage girl hearing her new voice for the first time. You should have seen the joy on her face. Maybe this resonates with me because when my mother was alive, I was her “voice,” – she was profoundly deaf and, though she could speak, many people could not understand her: she often needed a translator to navigate the world. As a teenager, I am sorry to say, I was a reluctant speech donor. But I know that, on so many levels, the desire to communicate, to be heard, to be recognized as an individual, is a basic human need.

So I wonder, what would a church’s equivalent of speech donor be? Perhaps to be a voice for those in our culture who are not heard, whether because of physical disability, age, poverty, gender orientation, or life history. Who is invisible, who is unheard? In them, we might see Jesus.

There is one word in the parable of the sheep and goats that I cannot ignore. It says that “All the nations will be gathered before” the Son of Man. Does the parable speak to more than an individual church’s charity? Does it speak to how we live in our nation and culture? Is the whole

nation commanded to treat those on the margins of life with dignity and love? Are we called to do more than read this passage for our personal, private, spiritual benefit? Or do we apply its core message to our public, shared life? What if we shone the light of this rather challenging passage on the laws and systems we have put in place and hold in place? This gives a new meaning to “speech donor.”

This Thanksgiving, I hope that you will eat well. I hope that you will find a welcome around a table. I hope that you will feel the warmth of family and community. But I also hope that Matthew’s parable will inspire some creative thinking. We do not live in downtown Miami, so their mission is not ours, inspiring though it is. I am not expecting any of you to start companies that will manufacture speech, though some of you might want to donor a recording of your voice. Our mission field will be particular to us. Using the ancient theme of the parable, we will think about suffering in the broadest sense. We will do this because Jesus has promised to meet us there, gazing into our eyes in gratitude and love.

I close with this blessing – it’s called a Franciscan Blessing, but no one seems to know the author:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.