

“The Rule of Compassion”
Matthew 25:31-46

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This is the end of our Christian year and is a fitting day to remember that Jesus Christ is the head of the church and the power of our faith. But the word king always needs redefining because it is often associated with earthly rulers and powers. Speaking of earthly rulers, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama all die and go to heaven. God looks down from God's throne and asks McCain, "Do you think you deserve to be in heaven?" McCain takes a breath and then replies, "Well, I think so because I was a great leader and tried to follow the words in your great book." God looks down and then says, "You can sit to my left side." So, McCain takes his seat and then God asks the same question to Hillary, "Do you think you deserve to be in heaven?" Hillary thinks for a second and then replies, "I think so because I have been fighting for the rights of so many people for so long." God again looks down and this time says, "You can sit to my right side." Finally God turns to Barack Obama and asks, "Do you think you deserve to be in heaven?" Obama smiled and replied, "I think you're in my seat." This is of course only the beginning of many jokes to come about our new president.

So, is this the kind of ruler we are talking about when we say that Jesus is king? At first glance, the answer is yes. When we hear the words from Matthew about the son of man, Jesus, coming in glory and all the angels with him and sitting on the throne of his glory, we automatically think of our earthly thrones and powers. When we hear the image of Jesus separating the sheep from the goats, we often think of our ways of separating the good apples from the bad apples. But, I often find myself asking, how could the God who came to us in the Spirit of Christ in humility, love and compassion, become so vengeful and vindictive after the resurrection? If God is consistent in love, mercy and justice, why would Jesus be different after the resurrection from when he was here with us on earth? If the kingdom of God is within us and the presence of Christ is about loving God and our neighbors, why the scary stuff all of a sudden? Why the threat of eternal punishment when we are promised eternal life right here and right now?

A closer look at the story helps us see that the main thrust of this scene is not punishment but presence. When people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ. The whole scene is a metaphor to help the early listeners and to help us see that the kingdom of God is not something that is very difficult to experience. It is as simple as loving our neighbors. Knowing Christ does not require spending 10 years in solitude. All we have to do is be present to the needs around us.

Also, in Middle Eastern culture, sheep and goats are equally good. According to Diane Christian who is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University at Buffalo, "Both animals are kosher and fit for sacrifice. Sheep aren't good and goats bad. Sheep aren't chosen because they're meek and gentle whereas goats are randy and rambunctious. Sheep and goats are different kinds of animals. They only signify difference. Sheep and goats look a lot alike. What they represent does not. Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the stranger, clothing the naked, helping the sick and visiting the imprisoned are corporal and spiritual works of mercy-simple actions. Sheep and goats are a very useful measure: goodness depends solely on what you're doing." Shepherds kept flocks consisting of both sheep and goats, mingled together. Eventually it would be necessary to separate the two. But this was not to say that goats were going to be thrown away. So, we can't take that metaphor that Jesus used literally. It is an image that is supposed to help us get to the heart of his message.

The message is that the kingdom of God, the rule of Christ, will ultimately triumph over the evils and sufferings of our world. Love, compassion and care are our ways to know the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not coming in some distant future or in some grandiose ways. It is right here right now whenever people act in the Spirit of Christ by visiting the prisoners, giving water to the thirsty, feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger. So, the invitation is to not be scared of the judgment of a scary earthly king who rules through human power and control. Our invitation is to know that if we are serious about knowing God in our lives, we need to be serious about our acts of justice and mercy. Such deeds are not a matter of "extra credit," but constitute the decisive criterion of judgment presupposed in all of vv. 23-25, the "weightier matters of the Law" of 23:23. Acts of compassion may become experiences of God's presence. As we see Christ present in other people, perhaps they will see Christ present in us as well.

Compassion is the rule of Christ. Christ the King Sunday is not about all the great things we believe about Jesus. Christ the King Sunday is about letting the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of compassion and love, rule in our hearts.

One of the Peanuts comic strips shows Snoopy sitting in the doorway of his dog house shivering violently during a winter storm. You can see that it is near Christmas time by the decorations on the dog house. Charlie Brown and Lucy are walking by – all bundled up and warm as toast. They offer a greeting, "Be of good cheer Snoopy," Charlie Brown says. "Yes, be of good cheer," Lucy replies. And they keep on walking as Snoopy sits there with chattering teeth. The message of the cartoon was powerful. Snoopy would no doubt prefer a blanket over a greeting. A compassionate heart is a reflection of the heart of God and the spirit of Christmas.

Leo Tolstoy wrote this story once. In a certain town there lived a cobbler, Martin. He had a tiny room in a basement, the one window of which looked out on to the street. Through it one could only see the feet of those who passed by, but Martin recognized the people by their boots. Martin had always been a good man; but his wife had died, leaving him with a three-year old son. But, no sooner had the boy reached an age when he could help his father and be a support as well as a joy to him, than he fell ill and died. Martin buried his son, and gave way to despair so great and overwhelming that he murmured against God. But using the advice of one of his friends, Martin bought a Bible and started reading it. It happened once that Martin sat up late, absorbed in his book until he fell asleep. 'Martin!' he suddenly heard a voice. 'Who's there?' he asked. He turned round and looked at the door; no one was there. Then he heard quite distinctly: 'Martin, Martin! Look out into the street tomorrow, for I shall come.'

The next morning as Martin sat down by the window to do his work, he looked at all the shoes that passed by and recognized the people who were wearing them. As he was looking, he saw that Stepánitch, one of his old friends, had leaned himself against the wall trying to warm himself up. The man was old and broken down. Then Martin felt moved to invite the old man for a cup of tea. 'Come in,' he said, 'and warm yourself a bit.' After he drank his tea, Stepánitch went away. Then Martin sat down to his work again while still looking out of the window, waiting for Christ. Then a woman came up in torn stockings and peasant-made shoes. She passed the window, but stopped by the wall. Martin glanced up and saw that she was a stranger, poorly dressed, and with a baby in her arms. She stopped by the wall with her back to the wind, trying to wrap the baby up though she had hardly anything to wrap it in. Martin ran outside and called to her. 'My dear, I say, my dear! Come inside. You can wrap him up better in a warm place. Come this way!' They went down the steps, entered the little room. 'There, sit down near the stove.' After feeding the woman, Martin also gave her some old clothes that belonged to his wife and son. After the woman had gone, Martin sat down to work again, but did not forget the

window, and every time a shadow fell on it he looked up at once to see who was passing. After a while Martin saw an apple-woman stop just in front of his window. She had a large basket, but there did not seem to be many apples left in it. On her back she had a sack full of wood chips, which she was taking home. The sack evidently hurt her, and she wanted to shift it from one shoulder to the other. While she was doing this, a boy snatched an apple out of the basket, and tried to slip away; but the old woman caught the boy by his sleeve. The boy screamed and the old woman scolded. Martin rushed out of the door. Martin separated them. And after a long discussion, Martin was able to bring peace to the situation. As the old woman was about to hoist her sack on her back, the lad sprang forward to her, saying, 'Let me carry it for you, Granny. I'm going that way.' When they were out of sight Martin went back to the house to work. When it got dark, he lit his lamp and decided to read the Gospels. As Martin opened the Bible, he heard footsteps, as though someone were moving behind him. Martin turned round, and it seemed to him as if people were standing in the dark corner. And a voice whispered in his ear: 'Martin, Martin, don't you know me?' 'Who is it?' muttered Martin. 'It is I,' said the voice. And out of the dark corner stepped Stepánitch, who smiled and vanishing like a cloud was seen no more. 'It is I,' said the voice again. And out of the darkness stepped the woman with the baby in her arms and the woman smiled and the baby laughed, and they too vanished. 'It is I,' said the voice once more. And the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped out and both smiled, and then they too vanished. And Martin's soul grew glad. Then, Martin began reading the Gospel just where it had opened; and at the top of the page he read 'I was hungry, and ye gave me food: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in.' And Martin understood that his dream had come true; and that the Savior had really come to him that day, and he had welcomed him.

May Christ the king of compassion be welcomed everyday among us and in our hearts. Amen.