

“Seeing Jesus in Other Folks’ Faces”
Mt. 25:31-46
Sunday, November 26, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

I hope you had a very Happy Thanksgiving. I hope you got all the turkey you wanted, and lots of your favorite pie. I have a hard time choosing when it comes to pie. Anyone else have that challenge? I understand this church has a long history of pie parties. Pumpkin is a classic. Whose favorite is pumpkin? -- raise your hands! Pecan is delicious; it was my Mom’s favorite; I like to have at least one sliver of pecan in her honor. Who are the pecan pie lovers among us? – raise your hands! My grandmother loved mincemeat...gotta honor grandma, too – right? Who loves mincemeat pie? – raise your hands up high! And there are all the fruit pies...apple, cherry, blueberry. Raise your hand if you like fruit pies! Have I left anyone out? Go ahead, call it out if I failed to name your favorite pie...

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We celebrate the future promise of Christ’s return and the coming of his kingdom in fullness. Today is the last day of the Christian year. Next Sunday begins the season of Advent, when we watch and wait for the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. And we are thankful. We celebrate the completion of Christ’s victory; we celebrate, with thankful hearts, the coming day when Christ’s love and peace and justice will reign on earth as it already reigns in heaven.

I. Seeing Jesus.

V. 40 in today’s gospel reading gives us a picture of what kind of King Jesus is. Jesus says in v. 40: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you

did it to me.” What you did to the least of these – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner – you did to me.

Do you hear how Jesus describes his family? Do you hear who this great King of all creation claims as his people? Jesus is king of the poor, the oppressed, the hungry and the sick. That’s the kind of king Jesus is.

And Jesus says, when you look into the face of another person, particularly a person in need, you are looking into the face of Christ. That’s the lesson of Jesus’ story about the Sheep and the Goats.

I don’t like today’s gospel reading. I’m going to say that right up front. I don’t like Jesus’ well-known story of the sheep and the goats. When I read it, I am left feeling overwhelmed and overburdened. There is always more need in the world than I have the resources to meet. When faced with the need in the world, or even just the need in my own community, or my own church, or my own family -- I quickly see that I will run out of money, time, and resources -- both emotional and physical. I will run out of resources long before I meet even half of the needs that confront me.

I don’t have to worry, though; there is wisdom to help me with this dilemma.

For example, Mother Theresa once said: “I never look at the masses as my responsibility; I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. So you begin with one. If I didn't pick up that one person, I wouldn't have picked up 42,000. My whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.”

We don’t have to help the masses all at once. We only have to love one person at a time. And I truly believe that the Holy Spirit clues us in, if we’re open to it. The Holy Spirit guides us

to the one person God wants us to reach out to in a particular time and place.

Still, I have a question: How do I see Jesus in another person's face and yet say "no" in a specific instance? That's my simple question in light of today's gospel reading.

I'm thinking of a homeless guy who used to pester me periodically at another church I used to serve. He'd show up at my office, asking for a handout. He'd be belligerent and entitled. He'd tell us we have to help him; we're Christians; the Bible says we have to give him food or money or a place to stay or whatever he was asking for that day.

Most folks who ask for help are grateful and respectful. But when I read this passage from Mt. 25, I think of this one belligerent guy. There's a certain category of needy folk who aren't too pleasant to help. This guy is in that category.

Here's where I remind myself that Jesus goes off alone to pray (Mt. 14:23). Jesus has compassion, yes. Compassion defines him. But he also has his limits. And he also holds people accountable. When he helps folks he often says things like, "Your sins are forgiven," or "Your faith has made you well," that sort of thing.

I'm not convinced he would quietly and meekly give food to a bully stopping by the office, no matter how needy that bully is. Jesus would look into the eyes of the person and see their true, deeper need, and respond accordingly. A bully homeless guy coming into the church office might need to hear "no;" he might need to be offered resources for changing his life. And if he rejects the offer of a changed life, Jesus might suggest that we shake off the dust and move on to help someone who is ready to change (Mt. 10:14).

Sometimes we get caught up in one teaching of Jesus and miss his overarching message. Christ the King is no doormat; he does not teach us to be doormats.

At the same time, we need to be careful not to make excuses for ourselves. I will

continue to wrestle with the question of the homeless guy who's a bully. Maybe he's mentally ill, or a drug addict, or both. Maybe he's a veteran. Lots of homeless folks, sadly, are veterans these days.

I do not have to be a doormat. I do have to show compassion, led by Christ.

II. Seeing the needy.

Helping others brings us joy. If it's right; if we're seeing Jesus in other folks' faces, then helping others brings us joy. You've heard folks say, "I got more out of it than they did" – the "it" being serving food at a soup kitchen or going on a mission trip or visiting the sick or whatever it is. It's not a burden; it's not overwhelming, as long as we remember that God's in charge. We are not given the task of helping every needy person in the world. As Mother Theresa says, we're just given the task of helping the person who's right in front of us. Seeing Jesus in their face. Encountering them as a real human being.

That great spiritual leader and Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, is known for many books, including The Wounded Healer. Nouwen once said: "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand."

"A chance meeting with Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, inspired Henri Nouwen to spend a year writing in the original L'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France. He felt at home there and in 1986 accepted an invitation to become pastor for the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Richmond Hill, north of Toronto, Canada.

"Daybreak was his homecoming. He lived in one of the homes and was asked to help Adam Arnett, a man with a severe disability, with his morning routine. Nouwen's book, Adam,

God's Beloved, describes how Adam became his friend, his teacher and his guide.

“After recovering from a severe depression, Nouwen began to experience perhaps his deepest fulfillment as a priest, friend, author, lecturer and mentor. He gave countless talks and retreats, welcomed hundreds of people for counsel and still found time to write. Whenever he traveled or lectured, he invited a core member (person with a disability) to accompany him as a co-facilitator. His contribution to the spirituality of L'Arche was as profound as the transformation he experienced at Daybreak” (www.henrinouwen.org).

There's something about the profound gift that can be received from helping others, the gift that comes from the needy person themselves. They have gifts to share with us, if we are open to receive. Henri Nouwen communicates some of those gifts in writing about his L'Arche experiences. Adam's grateful smile when Nouwen washes his face or hugs him or helps him to get dressed. Adam's gifts bring Nouwen out of a severe depression.

At the same time, the gift of such love comes with daily struggle. Sometimes the frustrations can outweigh the rewards. Ask one of the folks among us who cares for a sick or disabled loved one. The process is slow; it requires exquisite patience -- to help a severely disabled person in the most basic of ways...to eat, to wash, to dress. This gift of love comes with daily struggle. There is a cost.

In the upside-down kingdom of Jesus, the rewards of such service are great.

“Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...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” (Mt. 25:34, 40).

III. We are all needy.

Seeing Jesus in the face of a needy person is a way of giving thanks to our King. God's

loving plan for each of us is that we might discover and live this truth. God wants us to show compassion, not out of some legalistic rule-following, but out of the depth of love and joy that is found in knowing Jesus; knowing that we are loved by God.

We are all needy. When it comes to our need for God, we are all needy. Mother Theresa is needy, like the dying person she helps on the streets of Calcutta. Henri Nouwen is needy, like Adam, a core member of L'Arche.

You see, ultimately, the mistake we make is in thinking that some folks are needy and some folks are not. We feel better than, we feel superior to, we feel more respectable than...whoever it is we perceive as “needy” – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. Remember the Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1-12)? At the end times, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. Those who are merciful will receive mercy. Jesus, the embodiment of compassion, calls on his followers to, likewise, show compassion. Jesus calls on his followers to identify with the needy, to see Jesus in the needy, to consider the needy to be our family members, as does Jesus. We are all needy, when it comes right down to it. We all need Christ the King to save us. At the end times, we all need Christ the King to forgive us. In the present age, we all need Christ the King to show us the way.

“Once there was a little boy who wanted to meet God. The boy knew it would be a long trip to where God lived, so he packed a suitcase full of Twinkies and cans of root beer (his two favorite foods) and set off on his journey. He had only gone a few blocks when he passed an older woman sitting on a park bench, staring at some pigeons. She looked sad and lonely, so the boy went over and sat down next to her. He opened his suitcase, took out a package of Twinkies and offered it to her.

“She gratefully took it and smiled at him. Her smile was so warm and wonderful that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a can of his root beer. Once again, she took it and smiled at him. The boy was delighted. They sat there all afternoon, eating the Twinkies, drinking the root beers and watching the pigeons, without saying a word to each other.

“As it grew dark, the boy realized that he had better get start heading home and got up to leave. But before he had gone just a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the older woman and gave her a big hug. She gave him the biggest smile of all.

“When the boy got home, his mother noticed how happy he seemed. So she asked him what he had done all day. He told her: ‘I had lunch with God. And you know what? She has the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.’

“Meanwhile, the older woman had returned to her home. Her son also noticed how happy and contented she seemed so he asked her what she had done that had made her so happy. She said to him: ‘I sat in the park and ate Twinkies with God. You know, he's much younger than I expected.’”

Closing.

Jesus is an unexpected king. Jesus dies for us. Jesus tells us to show compassion to others as he has shown compassion to us. May you see Jesus in other folks' faces. May you enter into the joy of His kingdom.

Amen.