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Christ the King Sunday

The Least of These
Matthew 25: 31-46

31 "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.

32 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,

33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34 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;

35 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,

36 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.'

37 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?

38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

40 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.'

41 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;

42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

43 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.'

44 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?'

45 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.'

46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Most of us have heard at least some of these verses before—
 Jesus talking about how we treat *the least of these*.
 But do you know *when* he said these words?

Jesus tells this story after talking about the *end of the age*,
 the time when the Son of Man (himself) would come back again,
 to *judge* humanity, and *usher in* the kingdom of heaven.

He tells parables about what we are to do *while we wait* for His return,
 like the parable of the *10 bridesmaids* (5 wise and 5 foolish),
 and the parable of the *talents*, where 1 just hid his talent in the ground while
 the other two made more.

He compares the kingdom of God to these situations,
 and here in Matthew 25:31 he is specifically talking about the day
 the Son of Man will *return in glory to heaven, and judge humanity*.

And the judgment of humanity is *based on one thing*.

The way we are separated into sheep and goats rests on one activity:
how we treat those in need.

It's all based on *whether we serve* the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the
 naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

This is essentially Jesus' *Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22 in action*:
loving God and neighbor,
 because ultimately *God is in your neighbor*—each one of them.

This is also *Jesus the Good Shepherd*,
 separating the sheep and the goats,
 just like real Middle Eastern shepherds would do at the end of the day.
 Only this time the separation is *for all eternity*.
 The sheep to eternal life, the goats to eternal punishment.

It's *sobering*, isn't it?

We don't like to talk or think about God's judgment at the end of time, do we?
 I don't.

I prefer to think about the *compassion and mercy* of God.

But, what if we also find God's compassion and mercy in this passage?

I was reading pastor Lindsay Armstrong in *Feasting on the Word* this week, and Rev. Armstrong was comparing Matthew 25:31-46 to an annual **wellness check-up** at the doctor's office.

We often avoid those, we don't always like what we hear, right? (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, pg. 333)

But Armstrong says if we **want to know how our relationship with God is** doing, we should ask ourselves:

how are we treating those in need all around us?

How are we loving God and our neighbors?

Are we **apathetic** about the needy?

are we too **self-centered**?

are we only focused on our own families?

This could be seen as **a wellness check for the soul—**
or a check of our **love-meter**.

How is love flowing out of our lives?

Is our love flowing at all?

At the **holidays** sometimes it's easier for us to show neighborly love to those in need.

We adopt angels off the tree,

we bring in the mittens and gloves,

we help fill the Thanksgiving baskets, but what about year-round?

How are we reaching those in need on an **everyday basis**?

And do we realize that when we reach out,

we are **actually serving Jesus Christ**?

I read a story of a **small Jewish town in Russia**,

where there is a rabbi who disappears each Friday morning for several hours.

His devoted disciples boast that during those hours,

their rabbi goes up to heaven and talks to God.

A **stranger moves into town**, and he's skeptical about all this, so he decides to check things out. He hides and watches.

The rabbi gets up in the morning, says his prayers, and then dresses in peasant clothes.

He grabs an axe, goes off into the woods, and cuts some firewood,
 which he then hauls to a shack on the outskirts of the village.
 There an old woman and her sick son live.
 He leaves them the wood, enough for a week, and then sneaks back home.

Having observed the rabbi's actions,
 the newcomer stays on in the village and becomes his disciple.
 And whenever he hears one of the villagers say, "*On Friday morning our rabbi
 ascends all the way to heaven,*" the newcomer quietly adds, "***If not higher.***"
 Jim McGuiggan, *Jesus, Hero of Thy Soul* (Howard Publishing, 1998), p.15

How do we follow that ***example?***
 And how do we do it ***year-round? All the time?***

Which might beg another question,
 How do we help ***ALL the needy?***

If you drive by, walk by, turn on the TV, or open the paper you'll see so many
 needy people, how do we ***discern*** which ones to help?

Because Jesus says the ***only criteria*** are whether they are needy,
not whether they are ***deserving or grateful or happy*** to receive from us!
 Wow.

This is about seeing the ***dignity and value*** of everyone in need,
 Treating them as children of God.
 It's about seeing ***God's image*** in them,
 even those in maximum security prisons!
 Even those who ***don't or can't love*** us back!
 There is ***nothing*** in this passage about their ***response, only our actions.***
 It's a "just do it" kind of message—
just love, without expecting anything in return.

Which can bring up another question—is this ***salvation through works?***
 Is Jesus saying that as long as we help as many needy people as possible,
 that we will enter the kingdom of heaven?

I don't think so.
Not at all.

Because look what it says about **both groups**—
those who helped, and those who did not.

They are **SURPRISED** by the Lord's words.

They **can't believe that the Lord was the one to be found**
in all those needy people.

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, or thirsty, naked, or in prison?

And the King replies, *whatever you did for one of the least of these,*
you did for me.

In other words, the ones who served those in need,
didn't do it for some morality points.

They weren't trying to earn their salvation!

We ***don't keep score*** of the needy folks we help,

and hope that gets us where we need to go for all eternity, right?

This is ***not about our works,***

for even those who served ***didn't realize it was God*** they were serving.

No, this is about ***LOVE.***

A Love that doesn't keep score.

Love that is so ***overflowing,***

that it naturally leads to ***service, and help, and hope*** for those who need it.

There's a big difference, isn't there?

Today, ***as Christians*** who know this story,
we can fall into the ***keeping score temptation.***

We know that God is supposed to be in our neighbor,

so we can make a point to ***reach out and help*** the needy.

And I'm not saying we should ever stop serving.

I'm just wondering, ***is there more to the kind of love*** Jesus is talking about?

Because when are we ***surprised*** to find God in those who are hurting?

When are you surprised?

Sometimes we are surprised to see God in a ***homeless*** man,

or a woman standing on the ***side of the road*** holding a sign.

Sometimes we are surprised to see Jesus in a person who is sick,
or in need of clothes or food.

I'd say we'd often be surprised to see Christ in a ***prisoner,*** you know?

And what about seeing God in the person

who is **most annoying** at work, or school?
 Do we realize God is found in the person who is **never grateful**,
 Or the one who just **keeps begging for more**?

And what if we dig even deeper?
 Who are **the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned—for you**?

What if this story is about finding God in the most
unexpected people and places?
 Who would that be **for us, today**?

And you know how Jesus usually has many layers to his stories?
 What if the hungry, and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned, the stranger,
 are **people just like us**?

How many people right beside us are **hungry**,
 for meaning and hope in their lives? How many need to be **welcomed**?
 How many people are **thirsty** for some purpose?
 How many people feel **unwell** in their minds and emotions?
 How many people are struggling with pain or addiction or loneliness—and it's
 holding them hostage? They are **imprisoned** by pain!

I'm **not saying that Jesus wants us to avoid** those who are
 truly hungry for food, or naked, sick, the stranger,
 those imprisoned at the penitentiary.
We need to serve them!
 And **not just when it's the holidays**, and not just when it's **comfortable!**
 (most of the time it's not, and we are called to do it anyway!)
 I believe we should all **open our eyes** to see those in need around us!

But there's also this element of the story that is a **complete surprise**
 to find God in those who are needy.
 And sometimes the needy are **you and I**,
 or our neighbors sitting right beside us at **church**,
 walking right beside us at the **grocery** store,
 maybe even sitting beside us at the **holiday table**.
 Do we realize **these are people in need too**?

What if the ***least of these are those you meet in your ordinary, daily life?***
Both the righteous and unrighteous ask the Lord, “***when did we see YOU?***”
 They were just living their lives,
 and God was right in front of them!

So ***who are those in need that you encounter—today? This week?***

I think some of the ***most needy*** people at the holidays
 are those who are ***sad, or lonely, or depressed.***
 Sometimes those words describe ***us***, don't they?
 Holidays are harder because we are reminded of
who we don't have with us to celebrate, right?
 I desperately miss my grandparents, and my eldest son.
 Aren't there people you wish were celebrating with you?
 We all have that pain, don't we?

And for some,
 pain is so deep that they suffer with ***depression.***
 I know. I've suffered with depression off and on throughout my life,
 and I know many of you have too.
 I believe that depression is often a ***chemical imbalance*** of the brain,
 and medication can be a gift from God.
 But it is also be affected by difficult ***circumstances,***
 and by the social ***isolation,*** and hurtful way we ***talk*** in our culture today.

I was talking with Rev. Nellie Longwe about the ***faith and connections***
 that they have in their culture in ***Malawi,***
 people who care for one another,
 simply because they are ***neighbors, or family,***
 and the numbers of people who are ***flocking to churches.***

In contrast, in America, we ***don't usually know*** our neighbors,
 we ***don't always care*** for our own families,
 and so many people ***do not flock*** to church.
 And when we do,
 we ***don't always take the time to truly be the body of Christ*** to one another.
 Maybe we don't take the time ***to really ask*** how others are doing, and listen.

I believe as a result, we see ***so much emotional suffering.***

In some ways, our brothers and sisters in Malawi can endure hardship much better, because of their ***faith and connections***.

We have our own hardships,
but we often lack the resources of true community, faith, people who listen,
so we see a rise in ***depression, mental illness, and suicide***.

Did you know that ***suicide is the 2nd leading cause*** of death among adolescents and young adults,

and the ***10th leading cause*** of death in America, overall?

It cuts across all cultures and economic levels.

I believe that many of us in this church today,

Can understand some of that ***great desperation***,

and maybe some of us feel that way today.

Aaron Kheriaty of the University of California Irvine School of Medicine writes about how the ***rising rates of suicide, drug abuse, and depression*** can all be traced to increased social fragmentation.

Since the 1980s, reported ***loneliness*** among adults in the U.S.

increased from 20 percent to 40 percent.

Isn't that amazing?

The last surgeon general announced that social isolation is a major public health crisis, on par with heart disease or cancer!

Loneliness is associated with ***an increased risk*** of heart disease, stroke, premature death, and violence.

It is no accident that one of the most severe punishments we inflict on prisoners is ***solitary confinement***—which eventually leads to psychosis!

We are not meant to be alone.

Kheriaty wrote that a few years ago,

a man in his thirties took his own life by ***jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge*** (as fifteen hundred other people have done).

After his death, his psychiatrist went with the medical examiner to the man's apartment, where they found his diary.

The last entry, written just hours before he died, said,

"I'm going to walk to the bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump."

Aaron Kheriaty, "Dying of Despair" August 2017, First Things. He is an associate professor of psychiatry and director of the Medical Ethics Program at the University of California Irvine School of Medicine

What does that say to us? Are we paying attention to people?

In their book *Next Door As It Is in Heaven*, authors Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe discuss the **profound loneliness** so prevalent in our world, and how we contribute to this loneliness and lack of self-worth as we move throughout our day, because we rarely even lift our heads to offer a simple greeting to everyone we encounter.

In contrast, there is a daily practice among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa that is just the opposite. The most common greeting, equivalent to "hello" in English, is the expression: *Sawu bona*.

It literally means, "***I see you.***"

If you are a member of the tribe, you might reply by saying *Sikhona*, "***I am here.***"

The order is very important.

It's as if, ***when you see me, you bring me into existence.***

You can see how **powerful** that is in our world.

Ford and Briscoe write, "*When we merely move throughout our days without seeing people as people, then as far as it matters to us in that moment, they really don't exist. ... [But] being conscious of how we approach people we encounter through the normal routines of our day is a step toward bringing ... heaven here on our patch of earth.*"

Lance Ford & Brad Briscoe, [Next Door As It Is In Heaven](#) (NavPress, 2016), page 76.

What if that's the point of what Jesus has to say to us today in Matthew 25? ***we need to truly see one another.***

We need to truly **pay attention** to those around us!

And **reach out whenever we feel that nudge** of God urging us to make a phone call, write a card, stop by a house, or simply stop and listen to someone who is hurting.

Friends, the **Good News of the Gospel** today is found in Matthew 25:

Whenever we love the least of these,

the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned,

Whenever we love the lonely, the depressed, the isolated, the addicted,

Whenever we love the **struggling people** right around us,

*whatever their pain,
we love the Lord.*

May the love that *God pours into us, overflow in love* for all our neighbors.
And to that, all God's people said, Amen.