

November 20th 2011 – Preaching on Matthew 25: 31-46

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Today is both Christ the King, or Reign of Christ, Sunday AND the last Sunday in the liturgical year. In one week we will celebrate the liturgical New Year and usher in the season of Advent. We read all the lectionary passages this morning to give us a framework from which to hear the Matthew text, which is called “The Last Judgment” or “The Judgment of the Nations”. The placement of this text into the lectionary for Christ the King Sunday is *genius* as it highlights the paradox or tension of Christ’s identity and nature. There is some disagreement among scholars as to whether this text is a parable or a narrative, but either way, the commentaries do agree that it is the climax of Matthew’s Gospel. The Gospel of Matthew brings us the Sermon on the Mount including the Beatitudes, the teaching of the Lord’s prayer, and a host of parables including the parable of the Talents. What comes after this morning’s text is the lead up to Jesus’ arrest. In interpreting the text, it is important to consider what is meant by “all the nations”, by “sheep and goats” and by the shift from shepherd to king pathway through, keeping in mind that Jesus rarely presents teachings in terms of *either/or*. Rather, Jesus often offers *both/and* scenarios, or paradoxes. However, we who are formed, at least in part, by Modern, rational, and Cartesian sensibilities tend to want to impose a duality onto the text. Today’s passage tempts us in this way but a faithful reading demands that we do not give in. It invites us instead to hold the tension, the paradox. To hold all the nations, to hold the Shepherd turned King and Lamb and to hold the sheep and the goats. To hold what we can and cannot see. To hold the questions.

While the image of Christ the King pulls for a transcendent reading of God, the text reveals rather the immanence of God in the face of Jesus and in the face of God’s creation. Jesus asserts that he is in each and every person, in each of every one of the least of these – the broken ones. Jesus is Emmanuel as we will be reminded during Advent. He is with us, incarnate and intimately involved in the suffering of the world..... So what kind of *king* is Jesus? You know how sometimes using spell check leaves you with typos that are still actual English words? As I was typing this sermon, I

ended up typing Christ the **Kind** instead of Christ the **King**. (Pause)... I was tempted to leave the typo unchanged as I think it partly answers the Christological “who is Jesus” question. (Change tone) ...But on Reign of Christ Sunday, we need to remember that Jesus was a king of the people. Specifically, he was named King of the Jews and for this and everything that it represented, he was crucified. His presence as a king of the people, of the suffering, of the outcasts, was in sharp contrast to the ruling Empire. His presence, his radical inclusion of others, his inversion of the structures of Empire make Jesus a paradoxical king indeed. And the tradition has insisted that his crucifixion makes him Lamb of the World, to invert things one more time. Jesus as fully divine transcendent king, fully human immanent shepherd and eventually as slaughtered lamb. As we listen to the Matthew text emphasize human suffering and human response to suffering, we realize that as king, Jesus reigns over the misfits, the outcasts, and the broken. And that, my friends, includes everyone. He reigns over a kingdom that looks nothing like Empire. As King, He behaves as the shepherd of an often-lost flock, caring for each sheep - or goat – in an intimate and loving way. The Incarnate Christ is with us and we are never alone. When we are lost, he will come and find us. He will reach out to retrieve us. Time and again he will call us home. For this, *we choose* to crown him king. Not to Lord over us, but to love, lure, guide, persuade and challenge us. As God is with us, so we need to be with others. So says Jesus in today’s text and in many other passages in the Gospel. Jesus says that the two most important commandments are “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” and “Love your Neighbour As Yourself” One commandment flows from the other and we have come to know this formulation as the Golden Rule. It is both simple and subversive, but not easy. Put God first, not Empire. Then, in response to God’s love, love your neighbour, even your enemy. That’s what our Shepherd King asks of us.

Now we can turn our attention to the sheep, the goats and the least of these. The sheep and the goats are divided according to how they responded to “the least”. If they fed, and clothed, and visited the least then they were considered sheep and righteous. If they neglected to feed, clothe, and visit, then they were goats and accursed. Daniel J. Harrington argues that the least were the followers of Jesus. This usage and meaning

appears elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel and Harrington sees no reason to assume that it's different in this passage. He therefore interprets the passage as depicting the judgement of the Nations or the Gentiles, which would be both non-Jews and non-Christians. The word for nations and gentiles – *ethne* – is the same. Their status as righteous or cursed is dependant on how they have treated the *mikroi* – the little ones who are Jesus' disciples, his community. This is by no means the most commonly accepted interpretation, but it is an interesting one. It leads us away from seeing the Sheep as Christians and the Goats as non-Christians. And it places the little ones squarely with Jesus, as his community. As the ones who share with him the ministry to the poor and the marginalized. The little ones, who by virtue of their association with Jesus, are vulnerable. The first ones who seek to bring about the Kingdom of God over which Christ will reign eternally.

Just as Jesus rarely offers dualistic either/or dilemmas to solve, he also rarely focuses exclusively on the individual. Focusing on and valuing the individual over the family or community is a relatively recent tendency. Therefore, when **we** interpret scripture, a pitfall is this tendency toward only a personal interpretation. We ask, "what does this mean for me and my life? And while this may be helpful in our personal devotional practices, it is also helpful to consider the context at the time of writing. The Biblical writers wrote at a time where the questions would have been more like "what does this mean for us as a village, a society, a nation, a people? And for us to read in this way takes ear training. We need to lean in and listen for what the **community** is being called to do, how the **community** is being invited to participate and respond. Particularly when we gather to host the text together on Sunday morning. Given Harrington's exegetical interpretation, we can imagine that the community, who has already been called to love God and love others, is being assured that those who neglect to treat them with love and mercy will experience Christ's justice. On this day, all nations, all gentiles, all followers of the Jesus way will be asked to let their lives speak before Christ. Christ will then apply Christ's love, mercy and justice to each according to their life stories. To a vulnerable people living at the effect of Empire, this is good and reassuring news.

If we then move from the specific to the universal we can ask what does all this say about how God wants us to organize **our** nations, **our** societies? What are God's priorities? The text, as well as a myriad of other gospel texts, are clear. After we have received the gift of God's transformative love, we must become a blessing to others by loving them well. We should do this not out of duty, or to check off the list of tasks that we think will earn our salvation. No, thanks to God, our salvation is already handled. We just need to show up, and in loving and grateful response to God, love others. Love the ones who cannot help themselves and need you to act. Together we need to love the animals, the rivers and the oceans. Mend the world that has been entrusted to our care. The Body of Christ is called to help create a world where power, resources, wealth, and opportunity are more fully shared... and where people are present to hope, love and peace. Until Jesus returns, this is our collective work.....This has been the point of the Occupy movement, however unsafe, disorganized, unseemly or odd the tent communities seem to outsiders. The occupiers have done something amazing: they have chosen to show up, be present, listen to one another, share resources and in their own way try to make the world better. They are speaking truth to power, and whether we agree with their methodology or even think that they will impact the system is not the point. The point is they responded to the call. When we take seriously the communal call, we collectively speak truth to power, whether behind the ballot box, in the Middle East, on Wall Street, at the G20 summit, at vigils for the missing women, in the courts of the Church, or in front of the Art Gallery.

At the Evolve Conference, I attended a series of workshops led by Marc Yacanelli, a leader in Contemplative Youth Ministry. Marc asserts that what is most needed in youth ministry is presence. He says that what youth and young adults need more than anything is to feel the presence of God and to feel the presence of the adult leaders in their lives. I don't think we need to stop with youth and young adults. We all need to become occupiers who feel Presence and offer presence. We need to show up and become fully alive. The Covenant that was recited daily at Evolve included imperatives like Show Up. Pay Attention. Listen Well. Be Kind. Be Loving. Held by that covenant, the youth and young adults worshipped with joyful abandon, singing and dancing in the aisles of the

church, grinning and laughing. They showed up, occupied Highlands United, listened and loved well and were kind. It was amazing to witness!

According to Mary Oliver, the first, wildest, and wisest thing she knows is that the soul exists, and that it is built out of attentiveness. Whether we take the example of the youth at conference, the folks living in community in the various occupy camps, or the desert fathers and mothers, we are encouraged to occupy space and time with our full presence. We are called to attend to our connection to God, to our inner lives, and to others. We are called to not overlook or neglect a hurting world – the least of these. According to Simone Weil, “Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.” In the Mental Health work I do with Sharon, we call people in church communities to attend to those among them living with a Mental Illness of some kind. We encourage them to get involved, pay attention, engage, show up and enter into relationships that are often scary, inconvenient and challenging on the one hand and deeply rewarding, and life giving on the other. When people show up in this way, they know God as Incarnate, as Emmanuel. There is a tuning into the Sacred and even for just a moment, anything seems possible.

As we atune to this Divine presence something happens to us. We are converted. We are wonderfully drawn into relationship with God through Jesus. Sometimes this happens all at once like Paul on the road to Damascus. Perhaps in one precise moment, we feel drawn to follow Jesus. Perhaps in response we say a Jesus prayer and are born again.

Sometimes, as Sallie McFague has written, conversion moments happen more than once. We get another revelation of what it is to follow Jesus and we say yes -again. Perhaps in response, we arrange to be baptized or confirmed. Or perhaps our conversion takes place more gradually following a meandering rhythm – one where our walk with God makes us more and more Christian the way that participating in a marriage makes us more and more married. Either way, from the first moment that we engage in relationship with Jesus and begin to follow him, we may become aware of changes within ourselves. We become engaged in a process of sanctification, or theosis - the process of becoming more

and more holy - more like God. This process involves labours of love. It involves the power of the Spirit working in us and inspiring authentic acts of loving kindness.

John Wesley, our Methodist ancestor, emphasized the process of sanctification. He was clear that as a Christian, more is required than simply not doing harm or staying out of trouble. The parable of the Talents, which we heard recently, is a great example of that point. Burying your talent and staying out of trouble is insufficient. God wants more of us than that. Ouch. That almost sounds like working out or earning one's own salvation. Wait! What happened to being saved "not of ourselves but through faith and grace"? Well here is a chance to hold some of that tension I was talking about earlier. While we have been assured that ultimately as faithful followers of Jesus, we have indeed been ultimately saved, being in relationship with Jesus entails being called to respond, to participate, and to be transformed over and over again. Answering that call is how we are sanctified. If we endeavour, as today's text suggests, to see the face of Christ in every face, our chances of overlooking the hungry, the sick, and the hurting decreases. There is a bumper sticker quote on a door at VST that reads "It is true that God loves you just the way you are, but He also loves you too much to want you to stay that way." And so Jesus tells us what to do – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit prisoners and the sick. In sum, extend ourselves to those who need us. Wesley believed that visiting the sick and those in prison is most transformative and therefore most important. Jean Vanier, former philosophy professor and founder of the l'Arche communities, discovered this when he began to visit with people with intellectual disabilities. He understood four core questions central to their experience: Do you love me?, Do you want to be my friend? Does my life have any value? and Why have I been abandoned?... These questions reveal a poignant vulnerability. During his visits, Vanier discovered a world of pain he did not know had existed and which moved him so deeply that his ministry emerged. Eventually he went beyond visiting and began living with. Eating with. Fighting and forgiving with. He said "I'm beginning to realize that if Christians believed in Jesus hidden in the poor, the world would change". And so the l'Arche movement was born.

Sanctification or theosis is not about Good Works motivated by the desire for eternal reward, for praise or out of a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness. Nope - none of that. God doesn't want us to earn our salvation, or to operate from a place of "in order to". That would be acting out of fear – not love. The Spirit working in us creates the disposition necessary for us to fulfill what God is asking. The actions listed in Matthew aren't therefore provided merely as some checklist or litmus test, but as a means of identifying the spirit working in us. God wants our actions to bubble up in a natural outpouring of love. That must be why Wesley wants people to visit the sick more than anything else– because if we spend time with someone who is hurting and really pay attention, compassion is naturally stirred in us. We don't have to try to be compassionate – it is called forward naturally. God wants us to be blessed by acts of holy engagement. And this happens in relationship! First with oneself (for how can you love your neighbour as yourself if you don't first love yourself?) and then with the least of these – the ones who hunger and hurt. Our place in God's flock is already guaranteed - our growth, our transformation, our deepening connection to God is not. That *requires* something of each of us. Can you hear strains of Micah? – seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. The youth at Conference had it right. Be with others. See them – really see them. Show Up, Pay Attention, Listen Well, Be Kind, Be Loving.

Sallie McFague has quoted Irenaeus of Lyons as asserting that "the glory of God is every creature fully alive." Her response is to assert that "We live to give God glory by loving the world and everything in it." God is glorified when we are fully alive and we love what God loves! Today's Matthew text points to the importance of relationship, of showing up, of being with the other in their pain. It names feeding, clothing, and visiting as expressions of God's love working in and through us. Being present and responding with love does not only benefit the recipient but also the giver. The giver is transformed in the moment of giving. In this way, the giver is made fully alive and God is glorified. This is an opportunity to forget about self and serve as a medium for God's grace in the world. As we love the world, we become more like God. We live into our potential as beings formed in God's image, each time we lovingly lay ourselves down for another. Jesus' assertion that one must lose one's life in order to save it, can be

understood in this way. We become fully alive when we forget about ourselves and pour ourselves out for others in love. We become fully alive and we glorify God.

As I hosted this text this past week, I became persuaded that our “scarcity” relationship to time can lead us to commit the sins of omission about which we are being warned. We can become so busy and so caught up with working, with our participation in the Global Economic Empire known today as Wall Street, that we don’t have any time or energy left over to respond to those in need of our care and attention. This isn’t new. As William Wordsworth, a theologian disguised as poet, put it over a century ago, “getting and spending we lay waste our power”. The power that we waste is the power of love. Many of us don’t think we have the time to stop and really see the person asking for money in front of the grocery store. In a Global City such a Vancouver, we insulate ourselves from the daily reminders that our attention and our care is needed. We say things like “I can’t possibly give to everyone or befriend everyone”. That’s likely true. But to be faithful to the call expressed in Matthew’s gospel we need to slow down enough to reconnect with God and to become present to the pain - and the beauty - of the world. This slowing down is central to the Slow Food movement. Walter Brueggemann refers to the “slow wisdom” of presence, care and relationality in our traditions as opposed to the “fast wisdom” of Empire. As we slow down and tune in, our ability to respond as Christ asks us to increases. We become present to the transformative power that is love. Christ’s love. Our love. So this coming Advent, in a quiet counter-cultural move of occupation, sanctification and glorification, let us all slow down and tune in – to the Sacred, to the whispers of Spirit, to the call of our loving God. And let’s also remember - God is never too tired, burned out or cynical to respond to each and every one of us. Just ask and God will answer. Just knock and God will open the door, and welcome you in God’s loving embrace. On the final judgement day, every nation will know and experience, in a way that is beyond our full understanding, the shocking grace and mercy of the *risen Christ*, the *Shepherd King*, the *Lamb of the World* and *our loving Saviour*...Alleluia, Amen!