Sermons at Christ Church

Bound to Christ in Love and Hope.

Christ The King Sunday
Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

'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.' Jesus said to his disciples. In today's gospel story Jesus cast a vision of a future that had bedeviled humans ever since humans became aware of themselves or when human consciousness emerged. Since time immemorial, humans have worried about the afterlife. What happens when we die? Is there another life beyond this life? Does death, your death and mine, mark the end of our lives?
What happens when we die? Is there a judgement after death?

The fact that we do not know the answers to these questions make human life more intriguing, exasperating and even hopeless.

Jesus in the gospel story allays our fears, provides answers to these questions and offers us a blueprint for life beyond death. Jesus' vision of a glorious king who sits in majesty and judges all the peoples of the earth make the point that death wouldn't have the last word.

But Jesus could make this claim, not only because he himself had conquered death and the grave, and that death no longer had dominion over him, but he wants us to understand that divine judgement in and of itself is a vindication of the justice of God. That there will be a judgement day, and divine justice is the only hope that makes sense and the only hope for anyone for whom the scales were tipped against.

Jesus helps us to understand that his kingdom is not about greed, selfishness, status, or power, but it is about the quite revolutionary work of feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty. Tending the sick. Welcoming strangers and visiting prisoners.

If divine judgment is the vindication of the justice of God, then you and I cannot live as though nothing matters or that God is absent from the daily lives of people. Fact is, because of the suffering of people, it may appear that God is absent in their lives or that their lives doesn't matter. But whenever it appears that God is absent because of suffering, our task is to fill in for God, after all we are co-creators with God.

The gospel story only affirms for us the essentially unique role of tending, mending, comforting, clothing, visiting, feeding, providing the basics for anyone who has the need for it, for anyone who is suffering.

Patricia Fanning and the parishioners who lead our outreach ministry do not wake up every morning and say, I will feed, clothe, and house every hungry and homeless person. Kathy Lyon and those who work with her in the prison ministry don't wake up every morning and say we will visit all the prisoners. Ann Barnes and the parishioners who work with her in the Refugee Ministry do not wake up and say we will meet all the needs of every Refugee. Joan Harvery, Matt and Julie Lawser, Janie James and Kathy Lyon don't wake up each morning and say they will visit every homebound parishioner with the Eucharist. Cathy Whittaker, Sara Kirkpatrick and Jan DeBoiissiere who organize the Lake Elkhorn Food Pantry do not feed every single kid.

And there are more parishioners who do a lot of ministries within this congregation, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, providing water to the thirsty and welcoming strangers.

The truth is that those who engage in this revolutionary work of ministry for the least among us, do so, not because they want to go to heaven, but because they know that the king demands nothing more than a heart which is willing to understand human need and suffering and desires to make a difference in the life of that suffering heart.

Those who do this work of ministry do it because they honor every single soul. Every soul matter to these quiet revolutionaries. The beauty in all this s, they practice a kind of self-sacrifice that honors the king of their lives and the children of the king who languish on the margins of any society.

There is a story of a child who was walking along a beach where thousands of starfish had been stranded by the receding tide. The child picks up each starfish and gently throws it back into the ocean to save it from dying. Observing this, an older man questions the child, pointing out the vast number of starfish and the impossibility of saving them all. The child pauses, throws another starfish into the sea and replies, **"It made a difference for that one."**

It is not the case that we would be able to meet every need of every single person. Absolutely not. But if we can make a difference in the life of one person, just one person, why not? Making a difference in the life of that one person is an honor to God. Always remember that there is this principle of honor-which is, even if we cannot meet the need of the suffering among us, we can still honor them for the human that they are.

In my Conversations with Manny offering at the Center for Spiritual Nourishment a couple of weeks ago, we talked about reverence as a pathway to God. I made the point that there are two facts about reverence-one, the adoration of God. To adore God means that we are aware of the presence of God, and that at each moment of our lives we stand before God. Second, the adoration of every human being. We adore every human being because God created human beings in God's image. There is a mutual reverence between human beings and God. God reverence humans because God depends on us, and we reverence each other because we see God in each other.

To take it a step further, what separates the righteous from the unrighteous in the gospel story is not blind adherence to a creed, but the idea that the righteous affirm something intrinsically divine about being human. The righteous affirm that to be genuinely human is to reflect God's image-which means to adore everyone. The unrighteous are those who sin, and to sin is the failure to be genuinely human, and those who sin are those who reject God and choose for themselves the external consequence of being the center of their own lives.

And so those who find themselves in hell can only say, it is because of me and my actions. And those who find themselves in heaven can only say it is because of him-that man who died, rose from the dead and is now the king of my life.

There is a story of Gerda Weissman Klein. Gerda was a Polish survivor of the Holocaust. She was 15 when she was taken prisoner. She endured years of forced labor in a concentration camp. In that same camp was her childhood friend Ilse.

One day, Ilse saw a single red raspberry in the gutter on her way to the factory where she worked. Ilse felt the temptation to eat that red raspberry, but she kept it in her pocket all day, and at night she presented it to Gerda on a fresh leaf.

Why did Ilse keep one single red raspberry all day, only to give it to her friend? She could have ate it, but she did not. In the Holocaust Museum in Boston, you would find this inscription:

Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present that night to me on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend.

Imagine that world. Jesus invites us today to imagine that world where we hold on to that one raspberry for another. Not because we don't have a need for it, but we believe that giving it to our friend makes all the difference.

This explains why Jesus even talks about judgement, because judgement is a testimony of honor for every human being. The idea of judgement places every human being in a position of responsibility. And because God created us in God's image and created us to be free, it is only the free and responsible human being that can be judged.

Make no mistake, every single one of us would be judged, those who set up the concentration camps, those who make life unbearable for the other, those who erect systems that diminish the value of their neighbors, those who have created barriers that deny the divinity of others, those who perpetrate violence on others and those who abuse the vulnerable other.

They will face judgment in much the same way as those who refuse to feed the sick, give water to the thirsty, didn't visit the prisoner, didn't cloth the naked and didn't welcome the stranger. There will be judgement for all those who deny the divine in others because they cannot see the divine in themselves.

Imagine if we lived in a world where there was no justice for Gerda or Ilse nor any punishment for those who created the conditions under which other people had to suffer.

The king can only be a king if the king is not only seen to be a herald of divine justice but demands justice as part of our relationship with everyone and with him. The good news is that we are free and we are responsible, that is why we would be judged by the king.

If Jesus is king, he is king, not because he commands an army of cavaliers who bear weapons of war. Jesus is king because he establishes order in our lives. Jesus is king because he provides some sense of direction for us. Jesus is a king who rules over human hearts and minds.

For that reason, this particular king can judge all the peoples of the world with the same yardstick because all the peoples of the world can at the barest minimum honor the least among all of us**. Amen.**