Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Petecost

The Reign of Christ

November 26, 2017

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MEETING JESUS Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Psalm 95:1–7a

Ephesians 1:15–23

Matthew 25:31–46

Today, on this last Sunday of the church year, we observe the Reign of Christ. It is appropriate that we do so. Beginning with the First Sunday of Advent, in our worship and observances, we have traced his life and ministry. We began our year anticipating and then celebrating his birth. We then remembered his baptism and followed him into the wilderness, and then we witnessed the beginning of his ministry of healing and teaching. Later, we followed him as he made his way to Jerusalem and the cross. We celebrated his resurrection, and the beginnings of the early church. We now focus on his eternal reign.

The Bible in various places presents us with the imagery of Christ, enthroned as King, reigning with God the Father and the Holy Spirit in the heavenly realm. But how do we continue to experience his presence among us, here and now, in the midst of all the chance and change that life brings? How do we meet him in the here and now? And how do we experience the presence of God in our daily lives? How is the Divine revealed to us?

Let us turn to our scripture passages for today to see what we can discover. The reading from the Hebrew scriptures and the reading from Matthew envision a reckoning, a final judgment in which there will be a separation between the righteous and the unfaithful.

In the Ezekiel passage, God is portrayed as a strong shepherd/king who seeks out his lost and scattered sheep. God will gather the lost and bring them to safety, feeding them and caring for them. “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” (Eze 34:12) To those who know their need of God, God will be as a generous and merciful shepherd. A word of judgment follows. God will reject the self-satisfied and strong sheep because they “pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with their horns.” God will judge between sheep and sheep.

Now, we may not like this note of judgment, but in our hearts we know—those who have no regard for the plight of the hungry and poor of our society, those who make a profit from the suffering of others (the greed of not all, but too many of the wealthiest and most powerful of our society comes to mind)—we have a sense that they will at some time face a day of reckoning.

And so the question for us is this: what must we do to be in relationship with God, the Holy One? Surely, we are called to imitate the saving works of God. We are to seek the lost, care for the weak, feed the hungry, and bind up the injured. It is as we do these deeds of love and mercy that the Divine will be revealed to us.

Matthew’s Parable of the Last Judgment carries the theme forward. Now, the Shepherd/King has become Jesus, the Lord, the Son of Man, who has returned in glory to reign in heaven, and again there is judgment, this time between the goats and the sheep. Let us briefly note some fascinating features of the scene portrayed in the parable. First, let us note that the parable speaks not of individuals but of groups (“all the nations will be gathered”) The parable speaks of “we,” not “I” (“when was it that *we* saw you sick. . .” ) Immediately, we begin to think of the actions of our nation, and also of our church communities. Secondly, let us note that both the goats and the sheep are “religious.” Everyone uses the right religious words. Everyone addresses the King/Shepherd as “Lord.” Being religious will get us nowhere. What is called for is faith embedded in a response to the needs of the neighbor, leading to social cohesion and human solidarity. Thirdly, what perhaps is most amazing about the scene in the Parable is that the righteous respond to the needs of the neighbor totally unaware that they are doing the right thing. It is simply out of human solidarity that they give drink to the thirsty and welcome the stranger and clothe the naked and visit the sick and the prisoner. They are not doing these things in order to get to heaven. They do these things simply because this is what human beings are to do. I have always liked what philosopher Charles Hartshorne said when he was asked if there were anything he would like to get rid of in the Bible. Responded Hartshorne, “Yes, I would like to get rid of all notions of heaven and hell because as long as you have heaven and hell you have human beings doing the right thing for the wrong reason. Human beings do the right thing in order to get to heaven. But getting to heaven ought not to be our goal. Our goal should simply be to respond to those in need for their own sake. In the parable of the Last Judgment, human beings do the right things simply because they are the right things to do. They are not even aware that they are doing the right thing.

This is not easy for us because our human motives in serving the least of our sisters and brothers are mixed. Sometimes we do what is right because it makes us feel good, and this good feeling of ours can become even more important than the act of service itself. Our language betrays us. We go on a mission trip or volunteer to feed the hungry, and we come back saying, “It was a wonderful experience for me to do that; I felt so great doing good, when can I go again? There seems to be nothing more important than *my* experience. Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison can also serve to re-enforce our own sense of privilege and entitlement. Thank goodness for the poor and hungry—thank goodness they are there for me to serve them. There but for the grace of God go I! Feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger can also become an excuse for not doing something to alleviate hunger or homelessness in our world. Our acts of service, our charity can be a way to avoid the weightier demands of justice.

There is one other motive that we ought to question. This motive is the commonly held belief that we feed the hungry and visit the sick and clothe the naked in order to “save” them, to bring them to Christ. But how can say that we are doing good to them in order to bring them to Christ, if in truth Christ in already fully present in them? Serving others is not a means to an end. It is an end in itself. Not taking into account our own feelings, or the blessing we receive from serving, or the purpose behind our serving, we are to serve the least of our brothers and sisters simply because they are in need.

It has to do with the heart. It is from the heart that we respond to the needs of the neighbor. The passage from Ephesians celebrates Christ as the ruler of the whole cosmos. There is a prayer included in the passage. The writer of the Letter, whether Paul or someone writing in his name, prays this prayer: “I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God’s call.” (Common English Version) The key to faithful living is seeing (in a spiritual sense) with the eyes of the heart. For when we see with our heart’s eyes, we see the neighbor in need, and we understand that we are all in this life together; that we will all rise or fall together; and yes, that there need not be any divisions between those who have and those who have not. We meet Christ in the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner, and the sick. The divine is revealed to us in the needs of the neighbor.

I love the old Gaelic rune:

*We saw a stranger yesterday,*

*We put food in the eating place,*

*Drink in the drinking place,*

*Music in the listening place*

*And, with the sacred name of the Triune God,*

*He blessed us and our house,*

*Our cattle and our dear ones.*

*As the lark says in her song:*

*Often, often, often, goes Christ in the stranger’s*

*guise.*

My friends, Christ the Lord, reigns eternally. But we continue to meet him here and now as we serve the needs of the needs of others, whenever and wherever their paths cross ours. So, by the grace of God may we so do.

*E pule kakou*: O God, most generous and merciful and kind, grant our hearts enough light to see what is the hope of God’s call in Christ Jesus, and in a true spirit of love help us to respond to the needs of the neighbor, the neighbors we already see, and the neighbors we too often fail to see, so that your will may be done on earth as in heaven. Hear our prayer, O gracious God. Amen.