

"Seeing the Reign of Christ"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 22, 2020

PLEASE READ:
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Several years ago, the writer Valerie Laws used a British public art grant to create a living poem with live sheep in northeastern England. She spray-painted a single word on the back of every sheep. As the sheep wandered about, the words took on a new poetic form every time they stopped. It's a kind of "organic haiku"! The only way to read the poetry, of course, is from a raised platform. I laughed when I read about this because it reminds me of the church. As the Psalmist writes, we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture, but too often, the message the world sees in us is mixed, if not completely indecipherable.

Today we have the confluence of two important days in the church and our country. Today is known as "Christ the King" Sunday, marking the end of the liturgical calendar, and this coming Thursday is Thanksgiving, our national holiday meant to be enjoyed with family and friends to count our blessings and give thanks to God. But it is an understatement to say that 2020 is *unprecedented*, challenging both any notions of the sovereignty of Christ in our world and making it hard to sing, "Now Thank We All Our God with heart and hands and voices."

We see in the news more political theater of the absurd, pandemic deaths that have exceeded a quarter million, health officials warning that we are just now entering into the pandemic's deadliest phase. To put that into perspective, we have lost more people to the pandemic in the United States alone than four times the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam war; seven times the number killed in the Korean War; or more than twice the number killed in World WW I... [\[1\]](#)

There is the pain of having to choose between sitting around the table with loved ones this Thanksgiving and safety protocols. We are thankful our oldest son and daughter are with us. But we would have loved to have our parents and other two sons join us as well. Maybe the silver lining of CV19 this year is that social distancing will help limit the unsocial arguing between family and friends over politics and the ongoing election shenanigans.

The fact that we are so divided as a nation at this particular time in history is heart-breaking because we need to be united to overcome the pandemic. We are exhausted and need to move on. We need to be together to rally around those millions who are out of work, to affirm people of color, to comfort the millions who are grieving the loss of loved ones, family and friends because of CV19. Indeed, we need to come together to make America great again. So today, I invite you to reflect with me on what it takes to see the sovereignty of Christ as we come to the end of the liturgical year. And for what are we giving thanks as we approach Thanksgiving?

Jesus challenges all of us who call ourselves Christians with his teaching about loving the least of these. No matter how many times I've read this text, it is convicting to me. I wonder how many times I've missed seeing Jesus in my neighbor, particularly those who I want to walk quickly by on the street. Jesus teaches in this parable that true religion, or faith that means anything to God, is showing care and compassion for the marginalized, the outcasts, the normally scorned and forgotten peoples of society.

We are saved by grace through faith. But faith without works is dead. Jesus never made it so clear. As we have been seeing throughout the gospel according to Matthew, God will judge us by our response to the needs of people around us. God's judgment does not depend on the knowledge we have acquired, or the fortunes we have gained, but on the love, we show "to the least of these."

Giving a hungry person food, a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner - these are all things anyone can do. Jesus is talking about basic compassion. It is not a question of giving away millions of dollars; it is about showing compassion in tangible ways.

What's interesting to me is how Jesus calls us to an uncalculating love. The righteous of this parable doesn't even know they are helping Christ. They helped because of one of two reasons. Either their hearts had been so transformed by the love of God that they helped instinctively, as a natural reaction to those in need, or because they obeyed the simple command to love your neighbor. Either way, they did not do it for personal gain. We don't do acts of compassion to become better Christians. We do acts of compassion because we *are* Christians. Just like the organic haiku of Valerie Law's poetry, the sheep are just being sheep and doing what sheep normally do!

It's so tempting to turn this into a moralistic parable, about what you *should* do. But nowhere are there commands or imperatives. Jesus simply says that we will be separated into the sheep and the goats based on how we lived our lives concerning "the least of these." Those who were cursed had the attitude of "If we had known it was you, we would have gladly helped." Some will help only if they are given praise and thanks and publicity, but to help like that is to pander to self-esteem. Such help is not generosity; it is thinly camouflaged selfishness.

But then Jesus says one of the most amazing things, "I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these siblings of mine, *you did it for me...*" He says, "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me."

The beautiful part of this teaching is that we can "see" Jesus whenever we show care and compassion to someone in need. Jesus is helping us to see what it will be like in his Kingdom, what the quality of service will be under his management. So, we not only help others to see, but *we* see the reign of Jesus whenever we live by his ethical imperatives:

Don't get revenge when wronged. Seek reconciliation. Don't repay violence with violence. Seek creative and transforming nonviolent alternatives. Don't focus on external conformity to moral codes. Focus on internal transformation in love. Don't love insiders and hate or fear outsiders. Welcome outsiders into a new "us," a new "we." The humanity that celebrates diversity in the context of love for all, justice for all, and mutual respect for all. Don't have anxiety about money or security or pleasure at the center of your life. Trust yourself to the care of God. Don't live for wealth, but for the living God who loves all people, including your enemies. Don't hate your enemies or competitors. Love them and do to them not as they have done to you—and not before they do to you—but as you wish they would do for you.[\[2\]](#)

I think whenever we put on a mask to minimize transmission of a deadly virus, we are caring for the least of these. When we check on our neighbors to see how they are doing, making a simple phone call, or delivering a welcome bag, or purchase a Dove, we are seeing the reign of Christ invade our lives, families, and community. When we show basic respect to someone who may think or vote differently, we are showing God's love, and when we make room in our communities for those who are different, whether racially, culturally, religiously, or in their gender or sexual orientation, we can see Jesus a little more clearly in our midst.

This is the beautiful paradox of this parable. We give service to King Jesus through feeding a hungry person, visiting the sick, or welcoming a stranger. Some people want to meet Jesus. Maybe we haven't been paying attention. Jesus is spelled out as much in how we live our lives as how we sing and pray.

It may not be obvious, but this is all about stewardship, isn't it? How we live and the choices and investments we make can help both others to see Jesus and can help us to see the reign of Christ permeating all of life. The question I invite you to ask is, "Can we be better coordinated than random sheep in how we form the Word of Jesus' love and compassion for the least of these around us?"

Perhaps loving the least of these begins with humbly acknowledging that we have first been the least of these; that it was Christ who welcomed us, who cared for us, and who has served us according to our most basic needs.

Secondly, loving the least of these means our goal is not so much to grow in attendance, but grow in service. Let's not be caught asking, "When Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we would not help you?" We'll see Christ as we participate in the New Covenant House food service, and the Dove Program providing support to families going through a hard time in our community. We'll see Christ as we shelter those victims of domestic violence and abuse, those struggling with addictions and anger management. We'll see Christ as we live spiritually, love inclusively, learn continuously, and leave a legacy. Stewardship is about learning what more we can do and how we might inspire generations to come through genuine kindness and mercy.

One last thought. At the end of the service, we will sing one of my favorite Thanksgiving hymns, "Now Thank We All Our God." It is always deeply moving to me because that beautiful hymn was written during another pandemic in the 17th century. The composer, Martin Rinkart, was a Lutheran minister who came to Eilenburg, Germany, at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War. The city of Eilenburg became a shelter for political and military refugees, but the result was overcrowding, and deadly pestilence, and famine. The Rinkart home was a refuge for victims, even though he was often hard-pressed to provide for his own family. During the height of a severe plague in 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 50 funerals a day. He performed more than 4,000 funerals that year, including that of his wife. I can't imagine how Rinkart mustered the faith to give thanks to God with so much death and violence going on all around him. But he did.

Perhaps that's another way we see the reign of Christ in our lives and world. We serve the least of these as if we are serving Christ. We give thanks, no matter what, counting the opportunity to serve, to love our neighbors, even our enemies, as a privilege and gift. We remember how Jesus became the least of these to lovingly serve us. As God's people, the sheep of God's pastures, we're called to love the least of these because that's who we are and what we do. Each of us can respond to Jesus' teaching in a variety of ways, but even in our unwitting wandering simply doing what we're called to do, I pray we will help others to see, joyfully, and with grateful hearts, the reign of Christ's love for all.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

[1] Gillian Brockell, "250,000 Lives Lost: How the pandemic compares to other deadly events in U.S. history" (*The Washington Post*, November 19, 2020), referenced online November 20, 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/11/19/ranking-covid-deaths-american-history/>

[2] Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Thomas Nelson: 2007), 77, 99–100, 125.