

Welcome, friends, to the end of the world, the last judgment.
Oh wait, didn't that happen in March? And May and June? And November?
It seems like nothing in our world is as we knew it even eight months ago.

Well, it's not the end of the world... just the end of another church year.

Next Sunday, Advent begins, and we embark once again

on the whole magical mystery tour through our sacred Story.

We mark the end of this year by celebrating Christ as King,

the king who lived like a pauper; the king who was born as the most

vulnerable creature: a refugee infant, a threat to the powers,

an outsider who had no place to call home; the king who had no palace,

no place to lay his head as he traveled around preaching and healing;

the king who died the brutal death of a common criminal.

And we celebrate Jesus the King who will judge us all on the Day of the Lord,
the shepherd-king who will separate the sheep from the goats.

I don't know about you, but I'm not fond of judgment.

I spend too much time judging myself to think that's fun.

So this scenario that Jesus paints, with the King seated on his throne,

separating the "good" from the "bad," as a shepherd sorts his flock,

carries all kinds of troubling echoes – choosing up sides for kickball,

Prince Charming surveying all the would-be princess at the ball,

the bouncer at a fashionable club, selecting who's "cool enough" to get in.

Now, this sorting, where livestock are concerned, may not have major

consequences. Apparently, in those times, and maybe now, the goats and the

sheep would graze together during the day, but at night they were separated –

apparently, goats like to sleep in the warm and sheep like fresh air.

But Jesus makes clear, as he tells this parable, that the consequences for

God's people are major. In the parable, the goats lose, big time.

The people listening to Jesus were pretty sure they knew who the goats were –

they were the sinners, who did not follow the Law; outsiders, the blemished,

people who were poor or sick or damaged, and therefore not blessed.

But what does Jesus do? He turns sheep-dom and goat-ness on its head.

Suddenly the “sheep” are not the “insiders,” the chosen ones of Israel:
rather, sheep are the ones who show compassion to exactly those outsiders.
And the goats are not the outsiders – they are the ones who arrogantly
go through life ignoring the alienated and the lost.
Suddenly identity means nothing: anyone is at risk of being a goat –
and everyone has the possibility of being a sheep.

And then Jesus makes another move to knock them off their pins:
He identifies himself as the starving one, the stranger, the prisoner: the Outsider.
He says, “I am the King who will judge in glory” and,
“I am the Stranger to whom you are to show mercy.”
This is like all those “Prince and the Pauper” stories in the world’s folklore:
The King who disguises himself as one of his subjects
to get an accurate view of how things are going in his kingdom.
This king might be anywhere! In anyone.
Now we are not only to be mindful for those in need –
we are to recognize Jesus in them. We need to see them, be in relationship.
And to recognize Jesus, we have to know him, as personally as He invites us to.
That’s what all those spiritual practices are for, to foster that relationship.
This parable is not about charity, but relationship. It’s about going across
boundaries of difference, carrying God’s contagious love to people in pain.

For the first eight months of this Covid-tide, we drew our energy inward,
wanting to stay connected to each other.
The Food Pantry at La Plata never stopped its ministry, but it contracted a bit.
The Plentiful Table at Wayside suspended its monthly meal to people in need.
We couldn’t see how we might connect with at-risk youth during a pandemic,
Obviously we couldn’t do our Gingerbread Extravaganza again.

Now, energy is rising to see how we might respond to this moment,
what gifts and resources we are uniquely equipped to offer.
Tomorrow night at 7 there will be an Outreach Brainstorming session to
put some specifics on where and how and to whom we can offer God’s love.
Today after church those who want to stay on can attend a meeting about
launching an online tutoring program for kids in our public schools.
I’m excited to see where the Spirit will lead us.
One way to discern that is to ask three questions:
What is breaking your heart? Who inspires you? What brings you fully alive?

Those answers will guide us to where God is inviting us to join him. But remember: our mission is not to meet needs. That's for social service agencies. The church's mission is to carry God's contagious love, to introduce people to Jesus, everywhere we find him. And he tells us here where we can find him. He says, "Look at me. You want to see the King of your heart?"

"I'm an African girl dying of AIDS.
I'm a homeless family camped out behind WalMart.
I'm a refugee from Honduras whose family was slaughtered in front of her.
in the Covid patient, and the healthcare worker tending that patient.

He says, "See me. Don't be distracted. See me. I love you."
That's what Mother Theresa would say when they asked her how she could hold these lepers, full of sores and filth. "When I look at them, I see Christ."

And you know what? We can learn to see that way too. Martin Luther called it "The Glorious Exchange," in which Christ takes upon himself our ragged beggars' clothes, our sin and self-orientation. It's how we can recognize Christ in beggars and prisoners, the sick, the hungry, because those are our clothes he's wearing.

This Exchange isn't only about Christ taking on our status – it's about giving us His. He takes our rags and instead dresses us in His royal robes of silk and velvet, His perfect righteousness. That is put on us, it covers us, it redefines us. It's how God sees us, through Christ, as already holy. And so we get to be Christ, his hands and feet and eyes and voice bearing light to people who badly need it. God wants our "I love you" to Him to have flesh on it, just like God knew we needed His "I love you" to us to have flesh on it. God didn't send a check for us – He sent a Son, whom we know as Jesus the Christ; Christ the King, who has friends in low places. Even us!

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father: take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

This inheritance is already ours – we draw on it every time we pray, every time we lose ourselves in praise, every time we pray for God's healing on each other, every time we access *the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe*. We draw on it every time we meet the Jesus, who wants to fill us with peace beyond comprehension, joy beyond measure, power beyond our strength, wisdom beyond reason, life beyond death – and love that never ends. *Amen*.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, "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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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;** 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, 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.' 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 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.**'

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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.' 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?'

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

Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.