

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: November 26, 2017

The Feast of Christ the King: Matthew 25: 31-46: *Whenever You Do Unto The Least of These, You Do It Unto Me!*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man dies and finds himself standing in front of the pearly gates of Heaven. St. Peter apologetically explains that the computer system has broken down and that he must personally interview each candidate to see if they are fit for entrance into heaven. So St. Peter begins the questioning, "What kind deeds have you done that would make you worthy of heaven?" The man scratches his head, shrugs and answers, "I don't know!" St. Peter continues, "Well, for example, were you ever in Boy Scouts and involved in community projects that helped people?" The man replies, "No, I never did that." "Did you ever help an elderly person cross the street?" "No, I didn't even do that." "Did you ever contribute food to the local food pantry?" asks St. Peter. "No, I never did that," the man answers. "Well, tell me, did you ever do anything good for

anyone in your entire life?" St. Peter asks. The man thinks and finally says, "Well, you know, years and years ago I did go to church once and put a nickel in the offering plate. Does that count?" St. Peter is stumped. He does not feel that he should allow this man to enter heaven without discussing it first with Jesus. So St. Peter leaves the man and goes to explain the whole story to Jesus, and asks what to do. Jesus says, "It is simple. You give him back his nickel and tell him to go to...(PAUSE). Jesus may say hell in that manner in church but not me. Jesus is saying to us in this parable from Matthew's Gospel, on this last Sunday in Pentecost, on this Feast of Christ the King, that loving and caring for those in need is very serious business! Our parable is about our faith put into action. Oh, there are some who will dismiss this parable by saying, "This sounds like salvation by works. I believe in salvation by faith so I don't need to worry." It is true we are saved by faith, but what is faith? Is it just intellectual agreement or is it a very real participation in God's work in this world?

My sisters and brothers in Christ, this is classic Jesus who turns everything we thought to be right and true on its' proverbial head. The parable suggests that we are to view each individual as though he or she was Jesus Christ.

"Lord, when did we feed you or give you a drink, or clothe you, or visit you in prison?" was the question that was asked. Jesus response: "When you did it

unto the least of these you did it to me.”

There is an old children’s story, one that perhaps most of you have heard. The King’s Chancellor advised the mayor of a small town that his majesty was going to be making a visit to their humble little village. With great fanfare the mayor began to make the appropriate arrangements. On the day of the King’s arrival the mayor, dressed in his finery, waited in joyful anticipation. The hours slowly ticked away but no one entered the village. No one, that is, except a lonely lame beggar who asked the mayor for a drink of water to quench his thirst. Irritated, the mayor brushed him aside. He had no time for the dregs of society such as this; after all he was waiting for the King. Yet, at the end of the day the mayor stood alone; the King had never arrived. Furiously, he wrote the King’s Chancellor asking what had gone wrong, only to be told that the King had indeed passed through his village that day. The King’s Chancellor said, “The king was traveling incognito.” He had come in the disguise of a lonely lame beggar.

My brother and sisters, who is this Jesus Christ we love and worship today? Who is this Jesus Christ whom we say we follow? Where is this Jesus Christ in 2017? Jesus Christ is found in that spark of divinity within every human being. And there will be those who say, “But Lord, if we had only known that it was you we would have responded.”

That is precisely the point my fellow disciples. If the Bethlehem innkeeper had known that Mary was carrying within her womb the long awaited Messiah, no doubt he would have made room for them on that fateful night. If the Sanhedrin had known that it was God they were arresting on that fateful Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane, no doubt they would not have crucified him on Friday. They would have followed him. My brothers and sisters our goodness must be uncalculating. If we do a kind act simply because we think that it will assist us in gaining entrance into heaven, then our motivation was not love but selfishness.

Today's parable suggests that in the end the criteria by which we shall all be judged will be simple acts of kindness, caring and love. In our Gospel story, the King allows entrance into his kingdom not by affiliation with any particular denomination, religious group, or fame, or fortune, or credentials that might be listed in our obituaries. No, the final judgment is based upon how kind and caring and loving an individual was: feeding the hungry and giving a drink of water to the thirsty, showing concern for those in prison, clothing those without sufficient clothing, visiting the sick in the hospitals, nursing homes and rehab centers.

Who would ever have thought that such simple acts would carry so much weight on the final day? Who would ever believe that a person would be

judged for what we view as an oversight? When we think of divine judgment we think of a few life-making decisions, but according to this parable story; judgment comes every single day of our lives in the little commonplace things that we do or we do not do. Jesus is saying that the main business that we are in is the business of kindness and caring for one another and loving one another even when that person is not so lovable. That is the criteria by which God will view our life. As disciples of Jesus Christ we cannot ignore the law of kindness, caring and love.

Of course, there is a drawback in kindness. Kindness means nurturing and nurturing takes time. The Apostle Paul admonished the church at Ephesus: “Stop being mean, bad tempered and angry. Instead, be kind to one another, even as God has forgiven you because you belong to Christ Jesus.”

Our parable suggests that in the end we are judged not on the bad that we do, but the good that we do not do. Those on the left hand of the Son of Man are denied entrance into the Kingdom of God. Why? Because he said, I was hungry and thirsty and you gave me no food or water, I was in prison and you never came to see me, I was without clothes and you never gave me any.

We think of divine judgment as just the opposite of this. We think that the thing that will get us into heaven is by not committing certain sins. We think sin will send us to hell. We think a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ is a

religious person who goes to church every Sunday, who does not smoke, does not drink or take illegal drugs. A disciple does not gamble the house away, cheat on their spouse, steal from their employer or neighbor, does not take the Lord's name in vain. That misses the point completely my sisters and brothers. Jesus the Christ, fully God made fully human being, turns this kind of thinking completely upside down. There are many in churches who are fine, decent respectable people who are not doing anything for Christ. Last week, Jesus told the parable of the man who took a talent, a thousand dollars, a year's pay for a laborer and buried it. Why did Jesus condemn him? Not because he gambled it away, not because he frivolously spent it, but because he did nothing with it, those on the left hand side are kept out of the Kingdom of God, not because of what they did but because of what they failed to do. In the language of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church these were not sins of commission, but sins of omission.

There was a man named Henry Dunant. He was born to wealthy parents in Switzerland in 1828. Henry was a deeply compassionate man, he devoted considerable time assisting and encouraging and helping young people, especially the poor. At about eighteen years of age, he founded a Young Men's Christian Union. In 1859, at the age of 30, Dunant was traveling in northern Italy. He had only one object in view and that was to get the support of the

Emperor of France for a business project in Algeria. But the Emperor, Napoleon III, was busy driving the Austrians out of Northern Italy. Arriving on the day of the Battle of Solferino, Dunant could not believe what he saw. That day the French victory over the Austrians left 40,000 dead, dying and wounded soldiers scattered over a bloody, cold and muddy terrain for the wild dogs, wolves, vermin and vultures to consume. Dunant never did see the Emperor but what he did see changed him deeply and changed the world forever. He joined in the work of relief, sent his horse drawn coach to bring supplies, and wrote to his friends in Switzerland for aid. He worked for three days at this horrible task. Then he returned home and he began writing. He made an appeal against the terrifying inhumanity he had witnessed. He hoped he could influence people to prevent or to reduce the suffering of soldiers. The result of his writings was a book titled: A Memory of Solferino, printed in Geneva in October 1862. This famous book was mailed by the author to influential people throughout Europe. Henry's book excited them beyond all his expectations. In the last chapter of his book he made some proposals on make-shift hospitals, trained volunteers, and the necessity for international cooperation. Finally, five years later, at the Geneva Convention of 1864 sixteen nations signed accords-modeled on Dunant's proposals, acknowledging the neutrality of medical personnel in times of war. For their

banner and symbol they chose was a white flag with a red cross. And so the Red Cross was born!

Our challenge this week my sisters and brothers in Christ is this, a disciple of Jesus Christ must look upon each person as though he or she is Jesus. Can you do this? You know, our faith is truly quite simple, the criteria by which you will be judged is by your kindness, your caring and your love for the least and most vulnerable in this world. That is how we all will be judged. It is not the bad that we have done that will keep us out of heaven. We have already been forgiven for our sinful acts. That was done once and for all on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Rather, it is the good that we fail to recognize and do that will make us that grumpy, irritable mayor standing in the town square all alone asking himself the saddest question, where is the King? Where is the King? Where is the King? Amen.