

November 26 , 2023

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

Matthew 25:31-46

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A few years ago, I was in a Zoom meeting with some other clergy from around the United States. One of those pastors was Angie Shannon, a Lutheran pastor, an African-American woman, serving a congregation in Maryland. Her grandmother lived to age 100. As Angie said, “She seen some stuff. She saw how you hold onto your faith, when people can do anything to you, and you have no recourse.” Angie’s grandmother used the Matthew 25 passage (that we just heard) to teach her grandkids. She said, “We see Christ in every single person. Just assume that. Even if you are upset with them, you still have to see them through the prism of Christ. You might have to go on an excavation mission, baby ... When you are acting like a fool, hope they see you through that same prism.”

Well, that’s the sermon! This pretty well sums it up, right? Jesus prism, and ours, is often very different. I saw a meme this week that illustrates it. It’s a picture of the Dowager Countess of Downton Abbey, (played by Maggie Smith.) The caption is: “People are so judgmental. I can tell by just looking at them.”

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It was first proclaimed so by Pope Pius XI in 1925 to reassert Jesus’ lordship over the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism in European politics. Timely, right? But, it gets complicated.

A few years later, that same Pope Pius XI came to an agreement, with the Nazis that many historians believe lent moral legitimacy to Hitler’s regime. Today, as our democracy is being challenged by White nationalism, and authoritarian rhetoric--simply reasserting Christ as King over the politics of this world may seem like the solution. But this is the path and language now used by Christian nationalists, “reconstructing” Jesus’ lordship and extend God’s dominion through political movements in the United States and across Europe.

It's complex, right? Maybe our way through is to focus on seeing Christ in every person. When we do that, we living in the light and the authority of the Prince of Peace, the Christ of Love.

The Gospel of Matthew emphasizes that we are already living in God’s Kingdom when we act with kindness, when we keep in mind our kin-ship with all humanity. Remember that when this scripture was first heard, there were deep rifts between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians. The divisions were a source of serious conflict. In Matthew there was a consistent warning to Jesus’ followers against an attitude of superiority towards those who were in the wrong.

The warning to the faithful was to NOT condemn but to reclaim humanity and kinship. To see those who were in the wrong through the prism of Christ. Ironically, the metaphor of the king separating goats from sheep has often been used by Christians to separate out different “others” . But that is God’s job, not ours. The king gathers “all the nations” to the throne. “All the nations” means everyone, Jewish and non-Jewish. The sorting of people is not by their

profession of faith, or the attendance in church, or their traditions, or their heritage or their esteem in society, not by their material wealth, not by ethnicity or race, but by their kindness to others. The job of separating sheep from goats isn't ours, but God's.

Human rulers claim territories, wage wars, allot wealth, build walls, redraw maps, separate by class, by race, by sexual identity, and by gender. But the Kingdom of God is for all the nations. It is not a country with borders. There are no imaginary walls drawn by imperial powers declaring who is in or out. What this story of the Last Judgment tells us is that the people who are citizens of God's kingdom are recognized by the way they treat others.

There are all too many ways in that we do categorize and sort people. Recently, we have all experienced involuntary separation, due to the COVID-19 virus. But just this month, I'm also noticing among my friends, the rifts that are happening due to unresolved issues and strike in the Portland Public schools; the divisions within and between political parties; and the dire situation in Israel and Palestine. We see more and more fissures. . .

The parable from Matthew points us back toward one another. When we make love tangible by caring for another, we are looking into the very image of God.

Some of you may be familiar with the language of 'kin-dom of God' replacing 'kingdom of God.' At the Bishop's Convocation this month, we spoke it together in worship. Theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes that she finds it a meaningful alternative to "kingdom," a word fraught with colonial oppression and imperial violence. She wrote: Jesus used 'kingdom of God' to evoke . . . an alternative 'order of things'" over and against the political context of the Roman Empire and its Caesar, the actual kingdom and king at the time. Kin-dom: a beloved community, all people made in God's image.

I want to close with a story I read on CNN this week. On Thanksgiving Day, 2007, 9-year-old Chris Buchleitner was in the van with his mother driving in Arizona, a few miles from the Mexico border. She drove off the road and they tumbled down a steep hill. She lay, trapped in the van, as it rested against a tree, the engine still running. From the back seat, Chris reached forward and turned off the ignition. His mother was gasping for breath, unconscious.

Chris decided to get help. The hill was steep and the ground was loose. He slipped, fell back, scraped his knees. But he kept climbing until he got back to the road. There he found a welcome surprise: his dog Tanner, unharmed. had recently seen a Border Patrol helicopter, and he hoped to get help from them. But the helicopter was nowhere in sight. His mother's cell phone was out of range. Chris was cold, lonely, afraid, running out of ideas. And then, in the gathering dusk, he saw a stranger approaching.

The stranger, in black pants and sweatshirt, was Manuel Cordova. Manny, age 26, had crossed the border illegally, from Mexico, planning to start a new life. Manny had two daughters, and a third child on the way. He planned to travel the 60 miles north, to a major city in Arizona and find whatever work he could, to support his family. When we saw the frightened child, Manny had to choose. He could keep going, safe for now from the Border Patrol, and leave the boy on his own. Or he could stay, help the boy, and risk getting caught by the same people he'd been evading for the last three days. Manny knew that he had to help.

First, they went to the van, but Chris' mother was unresponsive. Manny went back to the roadside. After days of hiding from authorities, he did everything he could to draw their attention.

He made a huge pile of wood and started a roaring fire, a signal, in case someone out there might see it and bring help. As Chris slept, with the dog as his pillow, Manny kept going back to the van, to see if the mother was still breathing. In the morning, two quail hunters came by in a pickup truck. Manny flagged them down. They had a satellite phone. One called 911, and the call went through. With help on the way, Manny could have headed on for Phoenix. But something in him had changed in the night. His destination had shifted. He decided that *this* was where he needed to be, waiting until an ambulance arrived to take Chris somewhere safe.

The ambulance came, but Chris' mother did not survive the night. Local and federal officials arrived at the scene, too. Manny said that they put him in handcuffs, but then apologized and removed them after speaking with Chris. "Forgive us, but it's my job," a Border Patrol agent told him. "You are illegal here." "No problem," Manny replied.

Chris didn't get a chance to say goodbye to Manny before paramedics took him away in an ambulance. But the firefighters at the scene who'd learned what Manuel had done for the boy, bid him farewell with a round of applause.

Manuel returned to Mexico as quietly as he'd left. But, less than two weeks after he'd been kicked out of the US, he found himself crossing the border again — this time as a guest of honor inside the Nogales Port of Entry. Police officers, firefighters and diplomats were there to greet him.

Official after official presented him with plaques etched with his name, praising his courage and selflessness. Mexico's top diplomat in the Arizona border city lauded Manuel for putting aside his needs and aspirations. When a TV camera panned in his direction, he smiled shyly and covered his face with a manila folder. And when Manuel finally had a chance to speak to the crowd, he could think of only one thing to say: "Gracias."

Manuel was well aware that some people see immigrants as criminals. Sixteen years after this experience he hopes in his story, people see the shared humanity that's often lost in the debate. Manny credits the heartbreaking night in the desert with helping him see the world and his place in it more clearly. Not as a hero, but as a man. "I was a mess. I was young. ... It really changed my way of thinking. . . .Because beforehand, I only thought about myself. What *I* did was what was important. Not anymore."

Over the years, Manny still gets questions from friends, just as he did from reporters. *If you could do it over again, would you make the same choice?* His answer is easy: "One and a thousand times more--without thinking about it or doubting it."

When did we see you, Lord? When you helped the stranger on the road, you saw me.