

Sunday, November 20, 2011  
Christ the King / Lectionary 34  
Christ the King / Proper 29

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24  
Psalm 95  
Ephesians 1:15–23  
Matthew 25:31–46  
Year A

I.N.I.

We are ending the church year today.

We are reading from Matthew for the last time until this cycle of readings return in 2014. Jesus tells his final story before being taken away to die, and what a doozy it is.

In the story, the Son of Man, a formidable biblical figure if there ever was one, with heavy steps climbs up and sits on the throne. The title of king is assigned to the figure, while he is also acting as judge.

It reminds me of the scene in the first Harry Potter book/movie where the first year students step up and try on the sorting hat in order to be assigned to their houses. Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff.

In the Gospel story the sheep are welcomed into the kingdom and placed on the right side. The goats who are banished from the kingdom are sorted into the left side.

It seems simple enough. I'm a praying man. I live for God's grace, and spend many moments trying to acknowledge it for myself and others. Here's one description of it:

*It is unearned love—the love that goes before, the love that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and your most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there. *Traveling Mercies*, by Annie Lamott p 139.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor killed by the Nazis, wrote a little bit about grace in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer used as his primary resource the gospel of Matthew as a corrective for what he called cheap grace. Recognizing the length that Jesus went to gather the outcast and sinner, to widen his welcome of tax collectors and prostitutes, to release us from the burdens of sin and death, Bonhoeffer calls that **expensive grace**. Blithely going about our business, not impelled to do anything but throw out phrases like well, we live by grace, or there but the grace of God go I, when faced with a heap of troubles, where there is a widening gap between rich and poor,

Bonhoeffer calls that **cheap grace**.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Any religion which professes to be concerned with the souls of people, but is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that cripple them—such a religion is a dry-as-dust religion.”

In chapter 25 of Matthew where we are placed today, there are three stories that rise like a crescendo to shake the listeners to their very core, the parable of the wise and foolish maidens, the parable of the talents, and today’s description of judgment day. All three relate to questions of where we stand before God. All three make us wonder if we will be ready to welcome Christ when he comes. All three do not make it neat and tidy, like a pat on the back; rather, they leave the hearer hanging on the edge of their seats with the five foolish maidens missing the bridegroom because they didn’t have enough fuel for their lamps in the first story, the poor slave who buried his talents thrown into a corner crying and grinding his teeth in the second, and the goats on the left in today’s gospel banished, punished, and in hell.

But by the time we reach the zenith of Jesus’ storytelling we have also seen him in action. We have seen him invite Matthew from his tax booth to follow him. We’ve heard him instruct his disciples to forgive not seven times, meaning infinity, but seventy times seven, infinity times infinity. We’ve seen him banter with the woman from the wrong side of the tracks in Tyre only to tell her that her daughter will be healed from her demons. We know that Jesus throws around grace like bailout money to convicted felons, the unemployed, and those underwater, one sinner at a time.

If you follow today’s question and answer format between the judging king and all the nations before him, what you discover is what those on the left and those on the right have in common is--surprise. They didn’t know that the things they did welcomed Christ. They didn’t know that the things they didn’t do did not welcome Christ.

My question is, do we know now? Or if we don’t does it matter?

When those serving the global community on behalf of the church, is their primary motivation a response to Jesus or a response to those in need? Or doesn’t it matter?

What are your stories about your own acts of kindness, mercy, and grace to those who were in need, or how you have received acts of kindness, mercy, and grace? Have you seen Christ in them? Would you look for him?

Piles of driving snow had closed the Indiana Toll Road on a January day, the day before classes resumed at my college near Lake Michigan. With three girls, I was a passenger on a road trip from my home in New Jersey back to school after Christmas break. We did not have money nor knowledge about how to find a motel. One of the girls had a sorority sister near by. But something was wrong with the car. It kept getting colder and colder inside. The defroster broke, and the girl in the front kept scraping the windshield from the inside. The car’s get up go got up and went. We were in the middle of

nowhere, with little resources and little recourse. We tried to keep driving on local roads before GPS's. I cracked jokes as we began losing feeling in our extremities. We were not able to make to the sorority sister's home, as the car finally pattered out. I don't remember how, I just remember that somehow another car showed up before the days of cell phones, this one commandeered by the man we discovered came to get us, who was the father of the home we were trying to get to. The four of us, shivering and desperate for shelter, came into this warm house on a Sunday afternoon. The man of the house plunked down a shot of whiskey and told me to drink up, which I did. It warmed me all over, and I found my way to a basement bedroom and crashed into dreamland. Waking up, the aroma of roast beef greeted me. The four college students in need were welcomed to Sunday dinner at the home of those we did not know, who made us part of their family.

In that experience of hospitality, of welcome, I feel that Christ certainly must have shown up somewhere, in the exchange between beleaguered young adults and the folks who found us and brought us in from the cold.

For me, that day was a moment of grace, described earlier as *unearned love—the love that goes before, the love that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and your most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there. Traveling Mercies, Annie Lamott p 139.*

Friends in Christ, held and nourished in the community through this day around God's Word and the blessed Sacrament: let us together bask in the glow of grace, won for us by our blessed Lord Jesus Christ who on this Feast of Christ the King still fills all in all. Let us give thanks for those who serve those in need, and those in need who are served. And together let us jump into the river of life, where kindness offered is its own reward, and surprises may just await us, from a merciful and just God.

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