

The Festival of Christ the King
November 25-26, 2017
Matthew 25:31-46

“Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Compassionately”

Back in February, our congregation welcomed the Aljamous family into our midst. As you know, they are refugees from their homeland of Syria, displaced because of the war that was raging there. It's been quite a journey over this first year, for them and for us! They've done remarkably well in adjusting to a new life in a new land, learning how to navigate daily life here in northern Virginia. Before coming to America, the Aljamous family lived for nearly four years in a refugee camp in Jordan, a nation ruled since 1999 by King Abdullah, the constitutional monarch in that country. As a neighbor to Syria and sharing a border with it, Jordan opened its doors to massive numbers of refugees from Syria, so much so that they now make up about 20% of the population (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah_II_of_Jordan). Early in his reign as King of Jordan, Abdullah went out among the people disguised as a cameraman, a cabdriver, among other things, to see how things were going in the kingdom. He created quite a stir among his subjects because they never knew when they would encounter their king because they never knew what he would look like. On this last Sunday of the church year, the Festival of Christ the King, Jesus tells us something very similar. He tells us that before he comes again on that great and final day, he actually comes to us now, but in disguise. Jesus tells us that he is present among us here and now in the face of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, those who are naked or ill-clothed, the sick, and those in prison. And the Lord Jesus makes clear that by ministering to them we are ministering to our Lord himself: **“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me”** (Matthew 25:40). Our November sermon series, “Waiting for the Kingdom,” concludes today as we focus on Jesus' words under the theme, “Living Compassionately.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Beginning with the festival of All Saints (November 4-5), the mood of worship this month points us to watchful waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sermon themes included: “Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Expectantly” (Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish virgins, November 11-12); “Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Responsibly” (Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus' parable of the talents, November 18-19); and “Waiting for the Kingdom: Living Compassionately” (Matthew 25:31-46, the final judgment, November 25-26). Today's Gospel lesson gives a clear picture of that final judgment. For the child of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus, this picture of Christ's return and the final judgment are not intended to make us fearful and afraid, but to comfort and reassure us as we wait for the full and final revelation of God's kingdom when Jesus comes again. Until then, Jesus calls us to live compassionately.

Today's Gospel is not so much parable as it is a story of judgment and the end time. In our value-neutral, non-judgmental culture we may be tempted to believe that there is no higher standard of judgment than our own conscience. We are reminded today that we shall be judged. This is the very thing we confess each week in the Creed: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” We may be struggling with what side of Jesus we'll be on: with the sheep or with the goats? The truth is that believers do not “come into judgment” (John 3:18; 5:24); that is, they are not condemned. That judgment, that condemnation, took place at Calvary where Jesus wore a crown, not of gold but of thorns, and his throne was the wood of the cross. He took our sins and shortcomings upon himself, and died the death we deserved. He bore the brunt of God's righteous anger for our sin and rebellion. Through his cleansing blood, we are declared blameless and pure before our heavenly Father. Notice that for the believers not a single one of their sins is even mentioned here, only their good deeds. These good deeds are the fruit, not the root, of God's

amazing grace. These good deeds are not the cause of God's mercy and grace; they are the effect of it. All this is so because of what Christ Jesus has done for us. He claims us as his own in the waters of holy Baptism. He assures us of the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper. His Word brings life and salvation.

With all the nations gathered before Jesus, a division will then take place. As a shepherd who has a mixed flock divides sheep from goats at the end of the day, so Christ our Shepherd King will separate the sheep from the goats. Neither goat nor sheep had any awareness of Jesus being present in the form of "the least of these." That may surprise us because we would not expect the goats to get this, but we would expect that the sheep would know what's going on, right? After all, they are Jesus' own sheep. Both are blissfully unaware of the Shepherd King who is right in front of them. The thing is, we serve our neighbor only for the sake of our neighbor and that neighbor's need. "Sheep serve because they love their neighbor for the neighbor's sake, not because they perceive Jesus standing over the neighbor's shoulder. So oblivious are they of the connection between their deeds of service and their relationship to God through that that it must be spelled out for them by their Lord" (*Concordia Journal*, Fall 2017/Vol. 43/Number 4. Homiletical Helps for Proper 29 by Joel Biermann, p. 63). And yes, this is most definitely a joining Jesus on his mission connection with mission practice #4, "Doing Good." Here, "Jesus expects his people to act like his people. Sheep take care of their neighbors. There is an expectation, even an obligation, for Christians to serve those in need... The elect simply act like the elect. There is no room for complacency or apathy excused by misapplied or misunderstood gospel... Christians can find remarkable comfort and encouragement in the reality that no deed of service, regardless how obscure, insignificant, or unappreciated is ever wasted or lost. Jesus keeps track" (Ibid). Note that the works are not grand and glorious, but ordinary, everyday things like feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and imprisoned. This is what living compassionately looks like. So, the sheep are not brought into judgment. But the sins of the goats, the unbelievers, are brought forth and their verdict of condemnation is pronounced: **"You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"** (Matt. 25:41). That eternal fire was not made for people, but for the devil and his angels. Condemnation was not the plan of the Creator.

Until Jesus comes again, how do we live? Above all, we hold fast in faith to our Shepherd King in this life. He does not promise that life for his sheep is going to be easy. Through all of the ups and downs of life, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, we cling firmly in faith to our Shepherd King who gave his life for us. That Shepherd King comes to us this day in his Word, the Scriptures, and in his very Body and Blood in the Sacrament to strengthen us, assuring us of his grace and mercy. Until Jesus comes again, we will be tempted again and again to focus on self, rather than the needs of others. Rather than live compassionately, the temptation is to circle the wagons, close the ranks, and focus inward on ourselves. If ever there were a time when a bold response of faith is needed, that time is now! Until Jesus comes again, our Shepherd King calls us to love our neighbor – not just those who are well-placed, intelligent, good looking, or popular. All of these can return the favor, but our King calls us to love and serve those who cannot return the favor: the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and imprisoned. We are to love and serve them all as Christ has loved us.

After this worship service is over and until our Shepherd King comes again, we go back into the world which God dearly loves, and for whom God sent his own Son to give his life. We go to live compassionately until Christ shall come again. Amen.