

Happy Christ the King Sunday.

This is the last Sunday of the Church Year, which will start over again next week with the first Sunday of Advent. So, it's sort of like New Year's Eve, but several weeks early.

All year long the Sunday Gospels have been helping us to grow into and deepen our life with Jesus, by telling the stories of Jesus. So, we begin the year with Advent stories about longing for Jesus to get here, and then we tell stories about his birth at Christmas. We explore his life of teaching, healing and loving. In Lent and Holy Week, we remember how humanity's sinfulness led to his death on the cross. And at Easter we celebrate his victory over that death and ours with his forgiveness and his resurrection and ascension into Heaven. Then we have the story of receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and we explore what it's like for his followers to live as disciples with the help of that Spirit.

Most of those bible stories help to shape the lives we are living now as followers of Jesus. But some point to the times that are "not yet." And today is one of those "not yet" stories.

Since it's the last Sunday of the Church year we tell the last story that we know about Jesus. It's one that Jesus told himself about the future, about the not yet. When I'm done with this sermon, we'll proclaim our creed in which we say that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end."

The last several few weeks we've been telling that part of the story in our passages from the Gospel of Matthew.

In these stories Jesus' followers have figured out that Jesus is the Messiah, the one that God has sent to bring on the end of the age that they are in. And so, they have asked Jesus to tell them the end of the story—how things would shake out at the final judgement. They understood that this judgement was the Messiah's role, and here they had him right in front of them. And so, Jesus gives them signs to look for, and tells them what to do in the meantime – be ready at any moment for Jesus to return, don't bury the Word of God that you've been given to share, keep the faith – things like that.

In today's passage from the Gospel from Matthew, Jesus gets to the end of the story – what will it be like when the Messiah – Jesus -- "comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom has no end."

As usual, Jesus uses parables and metaphors to describe something that would be impossible for his followers, let alone us, to truly understand. How God judges, how God's forgiveness and compassion and invitation works, is as mysterious as God. But his followers asked, so he tries to give them an answer.

When the Messiah returns in his glory, he tells them he will be like a shepherd who separates his sheep from his goats. Now Jesus often talked about himself as a shepherd – who found the lost, and protected the flock and gathered them together, so that made sense to his disciples.

Fun fact – shepherds in the Middle East back then and now really do separate their sheep from their goats, which would all graze together. But at night shepherds put goats in a warmer place because they got cold much easier than sheep. Which wasn't that easy to do because Middle Eastern sheep and goats look a lot alike. The best way to tell them apart is the way their tails are pointing – sheep tails point down and goat tails point up.¹

So far so good. At the end of the age, the Messiah comes back as the King of Glory and gathers all humanity like a big flock of sheep and goats. The Messiah is not going to check the direction their tails are pointed, but the direction their hearts are pointed. The Messiah is going to look at how well humanity loved. How well did humanity love and receive the people that he sent them to love and receive in his name?

Because the King points out, he was in all those people. How you treated them is how you treated me, he would say at the end of time. And he wasn't just there in the easy to love, easy to find people – friends, family, people of the same race or neighborhood or religion, or set of opinions. But he was in the people who really needed that love, and who might be easy to ignore, the ones who were really hurting – who would show up on your doorstep hungry and thirsty, or in need of warmth or welcome, who were sick or imprisoned.

Now here's something interesting. Jesus' first followers were largely those people.² They were the ones that he said blessed are you hungry, and thirsty and sorrowing. They were the ones that he sent out two by two to proclaim that Good News of a loving God while packing no extra clothing, or food. They were the ones who were getting arrested and thrown in prison for talking about Jesus.

So, Jesus is saying to his followers, between now and the end of the age you and I will be traveling together and inviting people to love us and receive us and the good news that we are bringing. And if they do, they are going to have no trouble spending eternity with me on that final sorting day, because their hearts will already point in the right direction. And those who wouldn't love when they had all these opportunities to do so, they might find that loving me through eternity isn't going to be too different from loving me now. They may have already made up their own mind what group they are in, where their hearts are pointing.

But in the meantime, part of our job as followers of Jesus is to give people lots of opportunities to change their hearts, to love in new ways. What if that's what it means when Jesus says to his followers you've got to be like little child? What if that is why he called his followers from among those that society tended to reject – people who were sick, or strangers, or impoverished, or uneducated or mentally ill, or deeply troubled or traumatized?

Now I'm not saying that we as followers of Jesus are not called to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and tend the sick and visit the imprisoned. Because if you love with the love of Jesus, your heart will

¹ Wright, N. T. Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 140). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

² See Senior, Donald. The Gospel of Matthew: Interpreting Biblical Texts Series (p. 163). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

See also Wright, N. T. Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 141). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

tend to go there, because Jesus's heart is there. Jesus will give us lots of opportunities to love in that way.

But there will also be those times when G to be on the receiving end of people's love – so they can recognize Jesus in their love and care for us – that may be our role in getting people through that final sorting.

Does that change your image of what a follower of Jesus looks like, or the kind of disciple you are willing to be? Maybe that disciple is a little child that has trouble sitting still, or a panhandler with his hand out at 30th Street Station, or a person so impaired that they can't feed themselves or dress themselves, or so old that they need others to help them get around? Maybe that follower of Jesus looks like someone who doesn't have all the answers but is available to love and to be loved in a way that Jesus can be recognized in that simple acts of availability?

Christ the King Sunday asks can we recognize Jesus in the least ones as we look for the way into the Kingdom of God? And it also asks can we be those least ones so that others may find the Kingdom as well?

Luckily this story about the final sorting is a "not-yet" story. The story of serving, receiving, following and revealing Christ to others – that's a right now story. And we'll start it all over again next week, when we light our Advent wreath and sing O Come O Come Emmanuel.

Until then ... Amen.