

# REIGN OF CHRIST SUNDAY

November 22, 2020

Organ Prelude: Christ is the King

Bruce Nasmith

Welcome, Announcements & Worship Theme

## CALL TO WORSHIP:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink... I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25: 34-36)

**We come to church so that we can find inspiration to love.**

We come to church to experience the mercy, acceptance, and compassion of God.

**We come to church to learn how to live love with those around us.**

**ALL: Let us worship God together!**

Hymn: “The love of God comes close”

No. 474

1. The love of God comes close  
where stands an open door,  
to let the stranger in,  
to mingle rich and poor.

The love of God is here to stay,  
embracing those who walk the Way;  
the love of God is here to stay.

2. The peace of God comes close  
to those caught in the storm,  
forgoing lives of ease  
to ease the lives forlorn.

The peace of God is here to stay,  
embracing those who walk the Way;  
the peace of God is here to stay.

3. The joy of God comes close  
where faith encounters fears,  
where heights and depths of life  
are found through smiles and tears.

The joy of God is here to stay,  
embracing those who walk the Way;  
the joy of God is here to stay.

4. The grace of God comes close  
to those whose grace is spent,  
when hearts are tired or sore  
and hope is bruised and bent.

The grace of God is here to stay,  
embracing those who walk the Way;  
the grace of God is here to stay.

5. The Son of God comes close  
where people praise his name,  
where bread and wine are blest  
and shared as when he came.

The Son of God is here to stay,  
embracing those who walk the Way;  
the Son of God is here to stay.

Prayer of Approach, Confession & The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

The Peace of Christ be with you all;  
**And also with you.**

Children's Theme for Church School

Special Music: Ride the Chariot

African Spiritual arr. by William Henry Smith

*Soloist Shaun Alphonso with Anna Bateman, Erin Stone, Christopher Tanaka-Mann, and pianist Bruce Nasmith*

Scripture Readings: Matthew 25:31-45

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 37Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 40And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." 44Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison,

and did not take care of you?” 45Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

We are listening, O God;  
**Speak to us!**

Sermon: THE MARK OF A CHRISTIAN  
*(Full sermon can be found at the end of the bulletin)*

Dr. Harris

Special Music: How can I keep from Singing? American Folk Song arr. Richard Walters  
*soloists Anna Bateman, Erin Stone, and pianist Bruce Nasmith*

Prayers of Thanksgiving & Pastoral Concern

Hymn: “There's a spirit in the air”

No. 764

1. There's a spirit in the air,  
telling Christians everywhere:  
“Praise the love that Christ revealed,  
living, working, in our world!”

5. When a stranger's not alone,  
where the homeless find a home,  
praise the love that Christ revealed,  
living, working, in our world.

2. Lose your shyness, find your tongue,  
tell the world what God has done:  
God in Christ has come to stay.  
Live tomorrow's life today!

6. May the Spirit fill our praise,  
guide our thoughts and change our ways  
God in Christ has come to stay.  
Live tomorrow's life today!

3. When believers break the bread,  
when a hungry child is fed,  
praise the love that Christ revealed,  
living, working, in our world.

7. There's a Spirit in the air,  
calling people everywhere:  
praise the love that Christ revealed,  
living, working, in our world.

4. Still the Spirit gives us light,  
seeing wrong and setting right:  
God in Christ has come to stay.  
Live tomorrow's life today!

(Descant)  
Praise the love! Praise the love!  
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

Benediction

Threefold Amen

Organ Postlude: Hornpipe from the Royal Water Music

G. F. Handel

# THE MARK OF A CHRISTIAN

Matthew 25:31-45

Most of us gathered for worship would call ourselves Christians, would we not? So what's the mark of a Christian? How would people know to identify us as Christian? We may be far from perfect, but at least we should know what we're aiming for, no? What's the measure, the standard, the mark?

There are some obvious external things that would identify us as Christian. Some of us wear crosses or other symbols. We attend church in person or online and we support a community of faith financially. The more intentional of us read the bible or other devotional literature and we pray. We donate to charities as an expression of our faith. We decorate for Christmas and Easter.

But you know, Jesus wouldn't really think about any of these things as very distinctive. Part of it is that Jesus lived in a time and place where everybody had a minimum of religion. It's like the way it was in Canada a generation or two ago. Most people identified as Christian, most every Christian was connected to a church and most Christians did all those external things that communicated Christianity. Today, when this is no longer the case, the last thing I would want to do is discourage any of these practices. At least they communicate a minimum of connection to Christian faith.

But Jesus was pushing for more. Jesus was claiming that we are made for more. Jesus was declaring, in fact, that unless we go for more, we are losing out on the core essence of who we're made to be not only as Christians, but as human beings. Some of us may feel great about ourselves. We may feel secure in our finances, our relationships, our family, our health. But just because we feel good, doesn't mean there's not a whole other world of experience and conviction we're missing out on. That's the world of experience Jesus was after. And he had an easier time drawing in those who had nothing to lose because life was pretty rough for them. It's the comfortable, cozy and self-satisfied types Jesus had a problem with. That's when he started talking about judgement. It's like electrical current on a heart that's stopped. If we're not pursuing greater depths in our connection to life's true essence, then a jolt may help.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Jesus taught using parables. Parables are imaginary stories with a twist. They're all about the true mark of a Christian.

The parable for today opens with a scene, an imaginary scene in a time beyond. There is a last judgement. Most everyone in Jesus' day believed in a last judgement. That's how the current world order would end. But then, a new order would begin with God in charge. There would be a last judgement first. Everyone would be held to account. What have you believed and how have your beliefs shaped the content of your life, your decisions, your priorities and commitments, your relationships, the way you have dealt with your mistakes

and the mistakes of others toward you? All of it would be measured and judged before perfect justice and perfect mercy.

Jesus' talk about a last judgement is not very original. As already mentioned, most everyone in his time and place believed it. Rather, what's original in Jesus' teaching is who's on the right and who's on the left, so to speak. Those who are comfortable, cozy and self-satisfied because they think they're so great and are more than ready to judge, discount and condemn others, better watch out. God does not share their perspective. God's standards of righteousness are quite different. So what are God's standards according to Jesus?

There are several points Jesus makes in this parable. **1) First**, not everybody who claims to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, a good and righteous person, is necessarily so. Words can be cheap if there's no concrete evidence in life to back it up. Even though it's not for us to judge, there is a difference between good and bad, better and worse. There are standards, and as Christians we should be clear on what those standards are. Even as we should love everyone and judge no-one, we should know the difference between good and bad and what they look like in real life.

**2) Second**, Jesus begins to clarify the difference. And the difference is measured most clearly in how we treat the weakest and most vulnerable in our world. Why? Because the weakest and most vulnerable cannot reciprocate in any direct way, nor are they always attractive to us. In order to love them tangibly and practically, we have to overcome our self-interest (you know - I'll scratch your back more readily if I hope to get my back scratched in some way in return). We also have to overcome our distaste and repulsion. It's much easier to love lovely people, attractive people, kind, innocent and hard-working people. It's much harder to love those who are the authors of their own misfortune, the miserable, the criminal, the pathetic defeatists, the sickly, the hopeless whiners. Not only will they not reciprocate our love, but they'll also push all the wrong buttons in us.

The list Jesus gives is a standard list in his day of the losers and misfits of his society – the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the naked, the criminal, the drug addicts and carelessly infected. These are the losers of the world. And too often, they are the authors of their own misfortune. Sure they can blame others and they can blame God, but what about their own responsibility? They should not whine and complain but do something constructive to get out of their misery. Then we'd be more inclined to help them. In Jesus world just as much as in our own, people like this would be seen as condemned by God and by life and therefore deserving of our condemnation as well. But Jesus says no!

And he says something even more shocking. To see them truly as human beings not just losers and misfits, is to see Christ in them. If you really love them, you love Christ and if you really love Christ you love them. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. "In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it unto me." The crucifixion of Jesus wasn't

just about an innocent man unjustly punished because those in power felt threatened by his popularity and antagonistic to his vision of God. No. The cross was also interpreted as God in Jesus taking on the negativity, misery, hatred and contempt of the world and not throwing it back. It's about compassion and forgiveness, generosity of judgement and mercy.

And these virtues only mean something when there's lots to forgive and be generous about. Love is cheap unless there are great obstacles to overcome in our loving. That's when it grows strong and hearty. If love is the highest mark of being a Christian than love is most clearly tested as authentic when a person can love those who have nothing to give back and those who are ready to stab you in the back even as you are kind to them. To refuse to be triggered by their evil, to be shaped in your love by God not by others... this requires supernatural grace at work in your heart. That's what makes a Christian. We are all imperfect. We all need to grow in this. But let's be clear on the measure and standard. It is love, and love is most powerful when the person to be loved is not easy to love.

**3) But third,** Jesus takes it even a step further. The difference between those on his right and those on his left is not just knowing what real love looks like on the outside. It's also about what real love looks like on the inside, in the heart. The most revealing part of this parable is in the response of the righteous to Jesus commendation. "When was it that we saw you Jesus and did all these loving things to you?" Clearly, in loving the sick and vulnerable, the criminal and the dirty, hopeless losers and so on, the righteous are acting from their heart for no other reason than love itself. It is part of who they are. There is no motivation other than love. They are not doing it to receive anything. They are not doing it because people are attractive and lovely and draw it out of them.

But they are also not doing it because God would pat them on the back and reward them. They're not doing it because they've discerned Jesus hidden in all the weak and vulnerable. They don't know it's Jesus they're ministering to yet. No. They have done what they have done because it has become a central part of who they are, their inner identity. Their deepest core and essence as created by God out of love and for love, and the way they live their lives, have come together in a wonderful integration of faith and action, head, hands and heart. Isn't this beautiful?

Well, for most of us life is a little messier, a little more un-integrated. We do bad things to other people because they rub us the wrong way. We make judgements all the time as to who deserves what and how much. Other times we feel burnt because someone else proves to be undeserving of all the love we've shown them. They have not reciprocated in any way, failed to express gratitude and appreciation, and sometimes they have even turned on us for helping them.

Other times we have felt much better about helping other people, but inside us we have to admit there are conflicting motivations, some more pure and some less pure. We do care

about what other people think, about optics – what people see. We care about pleasing others and we care about how we may promote our own goodness or advancement through our good works. We care about reward. And we also care about guilt and fear punishment. We sometimes do what we do because the consequences would be worse. We'd rather serve a particular person and deal with a particular situation than deal with the aftermath and the consequences.

But we also have our moments of pure grace do we not? What moments make you most fulfilled as a human being before God? Jesus wants to offer the clearest standard, the strongest measure of that. To love others and to act on that love with the strongest motivation being that this is what life is about and such loving is the most important value in the world – this is living life to the full.

So what is the mark of a Christian? The greatest single mark of a Christian is love. And love is most powerful and real when it is expressed and lived independent of any other motivations or fulfillments than love itself.

But doesn't Jesus know that we will fail? Doesn't he know that for all our best intentions and efforts we will mess things up too often? Well but that's why the gospel is all about forgiveness. It's about the costly love of God toward us. That's why the climax of the narrative of the gospel is the cross. According to the world the cross is all bad news. It's about failure, defeat, humiliation. But for those of us who are clear on what the highest mark of being a Christian and a human are, the cross is the greatest victory because it is the most powerful lived expression of what love is. And love saves beginning with forgiveness. If we really begin to internalize divine forgiveness in our hearts, then we will be empowered to go back to the drawing board, inspired to love better and more consistently than we do. And as we rise and then sometimes fall again, we drink in the infinite waters of forgiveness and try to love again.

May each of us here find God's call to love empowering not discouraging. May we find healing for our broken hearts so that we may be renewed in love and energized to love... For in as much as we love others who are the least of these, we do it unto Christ himself. Amen.

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