**Which Neighbor Is Christ?**

**Matthew 25:31-46**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus said "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'”

We do not earn a place in God’s kingdom by what we do or do not do, for the kingdom has been prepared for those who are “blessed by My [Christ’s] Father to inherit the kingdom from the foundation of the world. BUT, there will be evidence of that work of God in our life. That means there will be outward evidence of the faith that is implanted within us – we will feed and nourish, cloth, tend, and visit those neighbors who need such care.

It is what those who are “in Christ” do.

Maybe you remember the other interaction with Jesus? And behold, a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

We’ve talked about this text before, but I want you to consider that the teacher of the law (a lawyer) was trying to *justify himself* by asking the question, “And who is my neighbor?”

To be fair to the teacher of the Torah, that is the same question we all have, of course it may sound a bit different. “Do I really have to love Hertha Herpolscheimer? Do I really need to love Samuel Schmedlap?”

In our Gospel lesson for today, when we care for physical needs of our neighbors, we are caring for Christ. So we, wanting to justify ourselves, ask, “Just exactly who is my neighbor…who is it that is Christ?”

Why is it we want to justify ourselves? Why is that we want to know “who exactly am I supposed to care for?”

Would you ask God if you truly had to give food and drink, house and home, care for or visit when sick, your children when they were growing up? If you felt you had to ask God if you had to care for them, then I guess we have an ever greater problem!

Would you ask God if you truly had to give food and drink, house and home, care for or visit when sick, your aged parents?

Would you ask God if you truly had to give food and drink, house and home, care for or visit when sick, your spouse?

Well, now you know the first tier of those in whom is Christ. Sometimes, it is more obvious than at other times, which ones of these are the “least of Christ’s brothers.” It is obvious when the loved ones which God has given to us need our help and assistance, and we do not even hesitate to ask. OK, we normally do not ask. There are maybe times when we may think, “They are in that situation, in trouble, by their own actions, it is their fault. I have helped them enough, it is time for them to do it on their own. The school of hard knocks might be tough, but maybe that is what they need to teach them a lesson.”

Now, outside of family, who is it that is the least of these Christ’s brothers – who is it that is Christ?

Do you remember when Saul, who became Paul, was on the road to Damascus to bring back those who had faith in Christ back in chains? (Acts 9) A light from heaven flashed, knocking him down, and a voice spoke, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Nd he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told to you what you must do.”

Dear friends in Christ, who is it that is “in Christ?” All those who are baptized, are baptized into Christ. All those with faith in Christ, are in Christ. So, which neighbor is in Christ? Those who are in Christ, those who are in faith – first and foremost.

Of course I hear the question you are already posing in your mind, What about those who are not Christians, those who are not believers? Since they are not ‘in Christ,’ then I am free to ignore them in their need without fear of consequence?”

I ask you, why are you trying to get out of helping your neighbor? It was Jesus who said you were to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. So, why do you want to excuse yourself from doing what faith does in you without your will being active by claiming someone is your enemy. Jesus asked that those who lied about Him in court, who mocked Him and spit upon Him, who nailed Him to the cross, would all be forgiven. Are you to be any different?

I know, I know, you aren’t God! You aren’t Jesus!

But you are to be Christ to those around you. You are to be doing these things to all those around you.

You and I know we have failed. You and I are the beloved of God. You and I realize we are not the best parents and confess our sin. We understand completely that all we have is a gift to them from God, but just as true – we know our sinfulness, that we do not always give of those gifts back to Him or use them to the help of their neighbor as they ought – and confess that sin as well.

You and I dear friends are the neighbors. We are the neighbors in Christ, for we realize that we are indeed sinners. We know how often we saw the hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, sick, and imprisoned and did nothing – or even worse, complained about how our spouse or children are so needy all the time and use the resources God gives us, that we’d selfishly use only for ourselves. We know our sins and willfully come into God’s house, for we know that we need something more from Him.

This parable is all about Jesus. He is the one who has done this all, who has prepared the kingdom for you from the foundation of the world. Jesus, God enfleshed, cared for the helpless – feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and freeing all those imprisoned by sin when He gave His own life unto death on the cross. He was and is – caring for you.

Christ is still working miraculous things. It is about Jesus covering our failures with His blood, dying on the cross to grant us forgiveness. It isn’t about what I have done, about what you have done, nor about anything anybody else has done, to gain eternal life and heaven. Jesus did it, and is still doing it.

Christ is the neighbor who is doing it to the least of them who are His brothers.

It is all about Jesus. Jesus did it to you!

You were naked, and in the water of baptism He clothed you with His righteousness.

Jesus did it to you!

You were hungering after righteousness, and He fed you His Word, gave you to eat of His own flesh and to drink of His blood.

Jesus did it to you!

You were thirsting for the mercy of God, and Christ gave you to drink of the water of life, springing up in you as a wellspring to salvation.

Jesus did it to you !

You were sick unto death, rotten with the cancer of sinfulness from you heart, and He gave you healing – a transfusion of His blood which cleansed you of all unrighteousness

Jesus did it to you

You were imprisoned in the bondage of your sins, held captive by Satan, but Christ freed you from sin and death. Christ unlocked the chains that kept you imprisoned with the Word of forgiveness that He Himself calls the keys which open the gates of the kingdom.

Dearly beloved of God, Jesus did it to you, just as he has done it to mw, so that today and everyday you may be confident to stand firm before you king. As He died and rose, you also will rise on the last day, for He has done it for you and to you. Amen.