Christ the King A 11/22/26
Trinity, Wethersfield

The observance of Christ the King Sunday is one of the newer feasts of the church year. It dates back only 100 years to 1925. The Roman Catholic pope at the time instituted it as a counter to the rising tide of totalitarianism, fascism, and the beginnings what evolved into the rise of Nazism in Europe. He intended to juxtapose the way in which Christ reigns – from the cross and not a gilded throne, from a place of vulnerability not coercive power – against the ways in which we seek to reign in our world.

But then 1925 was far from the first time we saw leaders use their authority to exclude, condemn, and commit acts of violence to achieve power. And it certainly was not the last. We could and probably at times should point fingers at those who make the news headlines for their power grabs, those who have led movements with grave consequences for humanity. But that same impulse to stand in the place of power is within each one of us. Each of us is tempted in our own ways to put ourselves in the place that God is.

It's in that context that we approach this parable today. The shepherd gathers all the nations and begins to separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep have been serving those in need – the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. The goats, it seems, have not. The surprise to all of them is that Jesus himself has been present in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. "What?!" say the sheep. "We perhaps remembering serving people, but we didn't recognize you!" Similarly the goats say "What?! If we'd known it was you we might have helped!" I'm editorializing here a little, but I think that's essentially the sentiment. Like Matthew's other parables in this series, some of the participants end up cast out into the place of punishment.

There is in this parable a clear moral lesson. Whether we are people of faith, or not. Whether we are conscious of seeing the face of Jesus in those who are in need or not. We are called to serve. We are called to meet the needs that are before us. Can we provide space to pack bags of food for local elementary families in need? Can we provide access to clothes and needed goods for people who are in need? Can we serve food to those in need in Hartford? Can we share our financial resources with organizations who tend the sick, house the veteran, get diapers to infants in need, and go out to the ends of the earth to serve others?

This congregation's answer to all of that has been a wholehearted "Yes!" Hawks Helpers that brings food to families in need through our local school was highlighted at this week's town council meeting. Sean's Closet operates with gentle presence for those who need access to what they can offer – I've seen already the quiet welcome to those who are referred for what they need. The request for support for tomorrow's Hands on Hartford meal was swift and energetic with people jumping in to volunteer the needed parts of the meal. The vestry voted to distribute much of our remaining Mission and Outreach funds to several local, regional, and global organizations at our meeting this week.

This parable challenges us to make this kind of care and service work a priority in our individual lives and as a church community. It's a call that brings together people of faith and people not of faith to meet the needs that surround us all the time. Hear Jesus's words to the sheep: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." This is vital work, and it makes a difference in the world. It takes a small step toward realizing the upside down reign of Christ in our world here and now.

And yet…and yet…

You didn't think I was going to stop there did you?

All of that is entirely true, and we need to hear it – both the affirmation of God and the challenge to continue to deepen our service. But parables are never *just* a nice and tidy moral message. I can't help but hold this parable in the context of what comes next. The immediate next sentence in Matthew's Gospel is this: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'"

Here's the thing. If we do our good works and go home to pat ourselves on the back, we edge dangerously close to putting ourselves in the seat of power over others. We do the opposite of what this Christ the King Sunday was intended to stand for. When we hear this parable, I have a temptation to put myself in the shepherd's sandals, so to speak. I look around and judge myself and others. Perhaps I look at my own life and try to add up my sheepish attempts to serve others and weigh them against my goat-like choices to ignore the needs that I could have cared for. Or I look at others and say, well, at least we're over here serving the needs of our neighbors, and point fingers at those who maybe aren't as much. I put myself in the place of the judge and start to create my own us and them, my own list of sheep and goats.

What this parable *really* calls us to do is to be in such close relationship with those in need that we fully recognize God's presence there. If we do that, what happens is that we end up right there with Christ in the place of the vulnerable. If we want to put ourselves in the shepherd's shoes, it's not in judging the sheep and the goats – within ourselves or in our community – it's in becoming so deeply in connection with those in need that we risk our own safety as Jesus himself does in his ministry and in his death.

It is very much Jesus' identification with the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned that gets him in so much trouble with the authorities. That identification is so subversive to power that it risks upsetting the status quo. To become so in connection with those needs, whether those needs are in our neighbor or within ourselves, is to recognize how deeply God grieves that pain and suffering of God's people. To recognize that so fully invites us not just to meet the needs, but to begin to question the whole world around us that fails to honor the presence of God among us. It is to begin to subvert the powers of this world that hold in place inequality and oppression.

What does that look like for us? I wonder if it looks like honoring those places of service with the same deep care and reverence that we might of this chancel. The places in the world where we meet Jesus just as we do together at this table of bread and wine. It wonder if it looks like bold and courageous decisions to lean into ministry even (or especially) when we feel nervous or afraid. I wonder if it means leaning into the discomfort when those acts of service challenge us in ways we did not expect or anticipate. The presence of Jesus, after all, whether in water, word, bread and wine or embodied in those in need is there not only to comfort but to challenge us into a new world, into a new kind of living.

While all of us may be tempted to place ourselves in the very position this day was created to challenge, the position of judging our own deeds and those of others. We might instead notice where it is we have been sheep, or goats, or people in need. In those

moments when we have served, Christ has been there whether we noticed or note. In those moments when we are the ones with deep longing and human need, God is present in and with us. And for those times we have been goat-ish, when our actions have created the kind of long punishment to which the goats are banished, we follow the story of the shepherd who lays down his life for all his flock. And there, too, in the banished place, in the place of the cross we find Jesus there with us, too.

For the shepherd comes for the whole flock, sheep and goats, every nation under heaven, meeting us in our deepest need and resurrecting the whole earth into the relational kin-dom of Christ. And maybe blessing us with this blessing written by Sister Ruth Marlene Fox:

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths,
And superficial relationships
So that you may live
Deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression,
And exploitation of people,
So that you may work for
Justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain,
Rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand
To comfort them and
To turn their pain to joy