

*Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York  
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York  
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*Christ the King Sunday– November 22, 2020, Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 95: 1-7a  
Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN*

A hungry man was walking down the street in a village of medieval Turkey. He had only a piece of bread in his hand. He came to a restaurant where some meatballs were being grilled. The cooking meat was so near and the smell so delicious the man held his piece of bread over the meat to capture some of the smell. As he started to eat the bread, the angry restaurant owner seized him and took him away to see a judge.

The owner protested, "This man was stealing the smell of my meat without asking permission. I want you to make him pay me for it." The judge thought for a moment, then held up his purse in front of the owner and shook it. "What are you doing that for?" asked the restaurant owner. The judge replied, "I am paying you. The sound of money is fair payment for the smell of food." Stephens, Wiley, *Heaven's Audit of One's Soul*, Sermons.com, <https://sermons.com/powerpoint/the-sheep-and-the-goats/1465617> .

Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats generally is accepted as one putting us on notice about Judgment Day – that final day when whomever still is alive on earth learns that he or she is destined to spend eternity with God or in "eternal punishment." It seems that one's destination is determined by how one treated the most vulnerable of people during one's life. Those who fed hungry people, gave thirsty people something to drink, welcomed strangers, clothed naked people, cared for sick people and visited imprisoned people will enjoy eternity; those who neglected people in need will not.

But wait, don't we Lutheran Christians say that we understand God's love and mercy to forgive us when we sin? Don't we believe that we are saved (or justified) by grace through faith, which is a gift of God? (Romans 11:1-6.) Don't we say that people can't "earn" their way to heaven? Don't we reject this concept of "works righteousness?" Yes, we do.

So how we treated (or didn't treat) people we encountered during our lives who were vulnerable – whether they represented Jesus or not – shouldn't be what our society would call “a litmus test” for determining the location of our eternal lives.

Moved by a commentary by one of my favorite theologians, the Rev Dr David Lose, formerly President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (now part of United Lutheran Seminary), I considered this teaching to be one of *visible* grace.

Dr. Lose contends that in “this passage ... Matthew isn't actually warning **his** community that they will be judged by their treatment of the poor, but rather is promising his beleaguered flock that the “nations” (v.32 – *ethnos* in Greek, usually referring to Gentiles or “foreigners” in Matthew and Septuagint) will be judged in accord with how **they** treat **them**, that is, Matthew's community.”

[www.davidlose.net/2020/11/christ-the-king-a-the-third-sacrament/](http://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/christ-the-king-a-the-third-sacrament/)

Although we are not under official attack **for our faith** today as the members of Matthew's community were, this assurance might ring with an especially poignant sound for people who are feeling the pain of the disparate impact upon Black and Brown people of the COVID-19 virus, or of maternal health outcomes during pregnancy. It may bring a word of comfort for those of us who are mourning the death or grieving for the imprisonment of our Black and Brown fathers, brothers, sons, cousins, uncles, grandfathers. It may engender hope in the lives that have been upended with job losses, followed by health insurance disappearance, hunger, and homelessness.

These and other discrepancies that seep into and overtake everyday life are the effects of the policies and practices of the White-dominated society of this country throughout the last four hundred years. And it's not over yet, is it? But a word of comfort from our friend and Lord, Jesus, is a welcome healing touch to beleaguered bodies and suffering souls.

Pastor Lose continued in the piece I read to explain why he saw this teaching as one of *visible* grace. He stated, “And, by choosing the word 'visible,' I want intentionally to link this interpretation to our understanding of the sacraments as ‘visible words.’” (*Ibid.*)

He stated that “God's manifestation and presence is not some mountain-top experience or the result of an arduous spiritual journey but instead connected to actual, physical bodies and circumstances. Want to see Jesus? Look to the needs of your neighbor and, especially, your most vulnerable neighbors.” (*Ibid.*)

And I would add that when we live in community – as the church -- we are connecting our spiritual selves to our actual, physical bodies and circumstances. We are allowing the growth of that community to provide care for one another **in the community**, and we are creating structures and connections that will bring the forces of government – local, state, and federal to bear on seeing to the well-being of Black and Brown bodies. This is so, even if it sometimes feels that those governmental forces are kicking and screaming all the way.

It's a long road, isn't it? And it's a hard climb. And sometimes we get tired. Sometimes we have to stop to rest or to take a deeper breath. And sometimes the road takes a switch-back to an even harder time. But ultimately, Jesus is there with us, showing us the way and sustaining each of us who are committed to the care, urging us on, calling us to hold the structures responsible, to demand justice, even if it's been denied for hundreds of years. No, especially **because** it's been denied for hundreds of years.

But what about Dr. Lose's comment about *visible* grace? He reminds us of a formula of sorts: “[a] promise of salvation attached to a command of Jesus involving a physical element and surprising us with God's unexpected presence. [Does that] Sound familiar? Pretty much the hallmarks of the way we – particularly in the traditions stemming from Luther and other 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformers – describe the sacraments.” (*Ibid.*)

Are we, in this COVID-19-infested world – worshipping on zoom, wearing masks, washing hands and surfaces, staying six feet away from people we don't live with – are we living sacramental lives? Are we living those lives because Jesus is available to us in the lives of people who are in need? It's no longer a surprise for us, as it was to Jesus' first hearers of this teaching, that when we meet the needs of others, we are serving Jesus and God in Jesus is revealed to us. And this is sacramental. We may not have been eating communion wafers and drinking wine for the last eight months, but God has made it possible for us to keep receiving the assurance of grace, of forgiveness, of acceptance, of love – every time we have served someone else.

Do you ever wonder why it's so common for people who take on a project of service to say that they felt they'd received more than they'd given? Could it be because, in serving someone in need, they've received the sacrament of the promise that God in Jesus “is really and truly available to us in the real and concrete needs of those around us and that God takes all of this so very seriously,

blessing our efforts and meeting our deepest needs when we reach out to those who are struggling?” (*Ibid.*)

Let’s pray: Loving God, our merciful creator, you bathe us in grace, feed us with hope, shelter us with faith, so that we can be true to Jesus Christ, the King, our Savior and Lord. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen