

MESSAGE: “Do It for Me”

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Liturgist Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to recruit kingdom-growers who attract through acts of compassion and character.

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. It began with advent anticipation of Messiah, celebrated the Christmas birth, and announced the epiphany of both the man and his message. It called us to repentance, prepared us for deliverance, and traced the remarkable journey that led to the cross and through it to the joy of Easter resurrection. It ignited our hearts with Spirit, shaping character, Church and community, honored saints, and offered thanksgiving. And today it invites us to bow before the throne of the King of kings, and Lord of lords, fulfilling the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate demanded of Jesus. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus replied, “if my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over...but as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” So what sort of kingdom is this? Where Christ governs from a throne of grace?

In this world, kingdoms rise and fall. Some become ‘king of the mountain’ for a time: Babylon the Great, the Pax Romana, the sun never sets on the British Empire, America First. But the kingdom of God is not from this world. Constantine might try to force conversion by the tip of a sword, but the kingdom of Christ can only be formed by a transformed heart, strangely warmed by a sacrificial, unflinching love. The cross of Christ is the seed of love that grows this kingdom which the world cannot comprehend or supplant.

In Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus gives us a snapshot of this kingdom. We see him enthroned in majesty, with all the nations of history gathered before him, dividing the faithful from the faithless as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Some of us rebel at this snapshot Jesus gives. Some of us rebel because we cannot bear the thought of a loving God sending some to eternal destruction, whatever that may be. Others of us rebel because we cannot abide the idea that eternal destiny is in any way based upon human behavior or character. Don’t the just live by faith and faith alone?

If we do not allow ourselves to listen, we will never hear what the Spirit teaches regarding the kingdom of God. King Jesus speaks to the sheep on his right, “Come, enter your reward, 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, sick and you cared for me, imprisoned and you visited me.”

“When did we do these things?” the sheep protest.

The king replies, “What you have done for the least of these, you have done for me.”

Turning to the left, King Jesus speaks to the gathered goats, “Depart from me, for I was hungry and you passed me by, thirsty yet you offered no relief, a stranger whom you ignored, naked and you would not help, sick and imprisoned, yet invisible to you.”

“When did we ignore your need?” the goats protest.

The king replies, “What you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me.”

The kingdom of God turns everything inside out. The last become first. The great become humbled. The least become great. The weak overcome the powerful, and the dead rise to life. The ethic creating this kingdom is revolutionary, but it is also incremental, advancing step by step, learning by learning, faith by faith, kindness by kindness.

There is a video-clip gone viral which amplifies an inspirational speech by a military officer. In it, he informs the graduating class that success begins with ‘making your bed.’ From there, he speaks of the humility, obedience and discipline required to earn your way to a place of respect and influence. One faithful act builds on another, and another, and another, until stature is achieved.

The grace of God is free and amazing, but don’t think for one minute that a Christian life of integrity comes without cost. The kingdom of God finds expression in the sacrificial love we offer, day by day, week by week, year by year. The choices we make today make an eternal mark, for good or for ill.

A favorite theme this time of year is the image of coming home: the soldier coming home from deployment, the student coming home on college break, the pre-schooler coming home to cookies and milk, the family coming home for Christmas, the dying coming home to Jesus. Why would anyone want to come home to a perfect stranger? Yet there are those who live their lives saying, “I’ll do what I want and seek God’s help at the last.” God may help; I trust God will, but do we really want to come home to a God we never took the time to get-to-know?

A week-ago, I visited my Mom for an afternoon. Sadly, by self-assessment, though only 85, she hinted that her dying journey has begun. She is concerned for my foster brother and sister who live with her. They are in their sixties, but with cognitive disabilities, look to her for guidance. She is doing her best to make arrangements for them when something happens to her. She looked at me with tears in her eyes and confessed, “I feel like I am reneging on my commitment!” When I asked her what she meant, she said, “I took on a responsibility I can’t carry to the end.”

“No one lives forever!” I said as I threw my arms around her, “You have taken care of others every day since you were about five-years-old! No one could ask for more!” It dawned on me that she needed assurance, assurance that her life has made a difference, assurance that my siblings and I will honor the responsibility she can no longer carry, assurance that when the time comes, she will be free to board the train bound for heaven.

“Welcome home,” her Savior will say, “enter in to the joy of your reward. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you gave me a home, naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you cared for me.”

“When, Lord, when did I do this?”

“Every time you received a call about a problem-child bounced from home to home, you took them in and provided a home. What you did for the least of these, you did for me.”

This is what builds the kingdom of God. Strategies for church growth, visioning for tomorrow and renovating structure all have their place, but they are never a substitute for giving a cup of water, offering forgiveness or welcoming a stranger. It occurs to me that what my Mom needed from me in that moment of conversation may be what you need from your pastor as well, assurance that your life does make a difference.

Well, it does. On any given Thursday morning, I watch you feed those who are hungry at the High Street Food Cupboard. At every Faith Journey, I see you meeting the need of those who thirst for God and human support. I watch as you greet people you have never met before, turning strangers into friends, I see you giving coats and blankets, mittens and prayer-quilts to those who shiver from life’s knocks and blows. I see you caring for the sick, visiting the homebound and offering a new start to a stopped-up life. I see it, and Jesus does, too. In fact, Jesus feels it from the inside out, saying, “Look around you. The kingdom of God is at hand.”