

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 Matthew 25:31-46
 November 26, 2017, Reign of Christ Sunday
 Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We're about to start a new year: this is the last Sunday of Pentecost, that part of the liturgical year which celebrates the formation and the development of the church. The Christian story is retold from the beginning again – the rhythm of our life together completes a cycle and begins again as it has for centuries. Next week we'll see blue – the color of advent – the time of preparation for the coming of Christ. So, happy New Year!

And for many of us, New Year's Eve is a time of both reflection and looking forward in hope, a time of renewed energy. So may it be for us now.

This week I had a conversation with a friend – he asked what I was preaching on this weekend and I told him that it was the “least of these” passage from Matthew – when did you feed, clothe, visit anyone – when you did that, you did it to me. And when you didn't you didn't do it to me.

His response was profound – that's the basis of what it means to be a Christian. I love that passage – of course he's right – it's all about the commandment to love God, to love our neighbor.

This passage is one of those where Jesus is speaking about the final judgment – we don't much like thinking about that, do we – it's not an easy concept for us. But we do need to hear it – the placement of this passage is important - Jesus knows the chief priests and scribes are gathering, watching, waiting, wanting to arrest him. In the very next chapter we find the beginning of the account of Jesus' death – and all the events leading up to that.

It's in this context that Jesus speaks – he knows what's ahead, that he's about to die. And he's making an extraordinary, maybe last ditch effort to teach in person those crowds that are gathered.

Jesus is very specific in his teaching: he is dealing with basic physical needs of hunger, thirst, clothing. He's also dealing with emotional needs: visiting the sick, visiting the prisoner, welcoming the stranger, hospitality. We are back to the central nature and mission of the church, aren't we: my friend is so very right: it's about love of God and love of neighbor. There's an urgency here – Jesus' effort to get his message across one more time, before it's too late.

But the parable tells us some still will not understand. And both groups use the same words: Lord, when was it that we saw you?

We are in the midst of that time of year of the great holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas when there is a tremendous outpouring of time and talent and it's wonderful. We seek out needs. We fill needs. The scouts, churches, schools, town offices, business and industry – all work to fill food pantries, provide meals either cooked or in baskets. We all want to do our best to fill those physical needs of hunger and thirst. We donate clothing, toys. We spend time in volunteer activities delivering these gifts to those in

need. We respond, most of us without even thinking about it. We just do it – it's part of who we are. And in times of disaster we respond too – for times such as these we're truly bonded together with people we know and those we don't know – don't we wish that would continue all the time! Thank God for these times – these are sacred moments. Sacred events.

This goes beyond keeping pantries full all year – the collection boxes are here all year, aren't they. We know need is ongoing – and I wonder, what if it's this bonding, this constant care and concern for each other is what Jesus is talking about? What if this bonding, person to person, were to be something that's part of who we are, every day, every hour, regardless of the season of the year?

This is about hospitality, isn't it – welcoming the stranger. Opening ourselves, taking the risk of offering presence, simply offering ourselves: that's hospitality. Being aware that there are so many hidden needs among us, the unspoken needs that are so hard to meet, those needs not so obvious that we have no idea are there. How can we even recognize those hidden needs? In the person sitting next to us? In the next pew? At the desk next to us? Our neighbor? How can we respond where we don't even know the need exists.

I truly believe it's through living out the hospitality that Jesus teaches us, offering presence, by simply offering ourselves.

A profound example: a woman sat in her pew one Sunday as she always did. But something was different this week. Her pastor knew that the next day she faced surgery for breast cancer and wondered how he could provide comfort to her through worship. He agonized over that sermon. Well, as he preached, a toddler escaped from his pew and wandered down the aisle away from his mother. He went into the pew with this woman and without a word, climbed up on the seat and into her lap and snuggled in. They simply held onto each other – eventually he, just as quietly, got down and went back to his mother, leaving the woman transformed.

No words. Hospitality. Presence. Comfort. Unconditional love. And he didn't have any idea what he'd just done. No idea of the depths of the need he'd just met.

The righteous answered, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison." And Jesus answered, "Just as you did it for the least of these, you did it to me." They were surprised. Surprised. They acted out of love, a love that creates service without judgment, without any thought of reward. They just did it. Not like those on the other side who asked the same question but with a different focus: when did we see you? The question of judgment – we would have acted if we'd known it was you but we didn't recognize you. The response: just as you did not do it for the least of these, you did not do it to me.

There's a difference between acting out of our faith grounded in love and acting out of ritual observance grounded in shoulds, isn't there. How do we stretch ourselves, free ourselves, into acting, risking presence, but leaving behind the first step of judgment – judgment which is God's alone. How do we forget ourselves in love? How do we respond to hidden needs? We can learn from that toddler, can't we.

In that child we see the most profound evidence that we are indeed bound in relationship, in covenant, with God and each other. A covenant which is initiated by God: we are invited to participate in relationship – our relationship to God and each

other. The whole Story from creation to the coming realm is about our relationship with God and each other.

There's such a tension between the individual and the community, isn't there. Our faith can become so private, so inside of us. But we are called into community – and we are accountable to each other, to this community. We simply can't be Christians alone. Each of us in our own way is called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner, welcome the stranger. We all have gifts and talents with which to serve. I call on each one of us, individually and communally, to consider those hidden needs, to become as children, to reach out in love grounded in that love of God expressed in Jesus Christ, without strings, without judgment, without the adult censor we all carry. Can we be as that child? Can we risk sharing ourselves in that way and doing God's transforming work?

Please join me in the reflection of things past and the hope for the future as we enter the new year. How will we respond to the least of these? The person sitting next to us? The person in the grocery store?

This became so real to me one day as I was, of all things, buying cat food. A woman came up, stood next to me, and was looking at the huge variety of foods available. Knowing that my cat will suddenly turn up her nose at an old favorite, I made a comment wondering what she'd like this time. The woman looked at me, smiled a small smile, and then her eyes watered. Her granddaughter had died that week and her beloved cat had come to live with grandma and grandpa. This was her first trip to the store to buy food for the cat. And all her pain rushed to the surface. All I could do was listen. There was nothing to say, but I'm so sorry, and touch her hand. A hidden need. A hidden pain. It was a gift to share that, even for that brief moment. We are all connected, all bound together.

I certainly miss opportunities – we all do! But here's the challenge, Jesus call to us all: how can we leave behind the judgment that so frequently comes to us? Do we see Jesus' face in those around us? Do others see the face of Jesus in us?

Another very dramatic story:

Once upon a time Pastor Jeremiah Steepak transformed himself into looking like a homeless person and went to the 10,000 member church where he was to be introduced as the new head pastor that morning. He walked around his soon to be church for 30 minutes while it was filling with people for service. Only 3 people out of the hundreds gathering said hello to him. He asked people for change to buy food. No one in the church gave him change.

He went into the sanctuary and sat down in the front of the church. He was asked by the ushers if he would please sit in the back.

He greeted people to be greeted back with stares and dirty looks, with people looking down on him and judging him.

As he sat in the back of the church, he listened to the announcements at the beginning of the worship service.

When all that was done, the elders were excited to introduce the new pastor of the church to the congregation. "We would like to introduce to you Pastor Jeremiah Steepak"

The congregation looked around clapping with joy and anticipation.

The unkempt, homeless stranger sitting in the back stood up and started walking down the aisle.the clapping stopped with all eyes on him.

He walked up to the altar and took the microphone from the elders and paused for a moment.

Then he spoke: "Then the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For 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 in, I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When did we see a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

After he recited this, he looked toward the congregation and told them all what he had experienced that morning.

Many began to cry and many heads were bowed in shame.

He then said, Today I see a gathering of people ...not a church of Jesus Christ. The world has enough people, but not enough disciples. When will you decide to become disciples?

He then dismissed service until the next week.

Being a Christian is more than something you talk about, isn't it. It's something you live by and share with others.

God promises us courage in the struggle. Let us in this new year, this time of thanksgiving and preparation for the coming of Jesus, here in this community of faith, and in all those anonymous moments, let us respond as disciples to the least of these. God has indeed blessed us and is calling us to new life. Let's pay attention to and respond, not only to the obvious needs, but also let's respond to the hidden needs, let us hear, see, sense another person, with or without words, starting with each other right here and reaching out to the community God calls us to serve.

Let us respond, not because we should...but because we may.

Happy New Year!

Amen.