

“Three-Dimensional Faith”
Christ the King A
Matthew 25:31-46

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The parable makes me sweat. No doubt it is from the heat of the flames of the fire prepared for the devil and his angels. At least it is good to know it was not prepared for our kind. This parable, however, fans those flames. The parable does what the law does to us. The law causes us to feel guilty. It is the panic that comes over us whenever we spot a police cruiser in our rearview mirror. Why is it we instinctively feel guilty? So, the parable drags the “least of these” not in range of our rearview mirror but right in front of our faces. To assuage our guilt we might increase our giving to Lutheran World Relief and put a whole dollar in the Salvation Army kettle at the grocery store entrance. We know it is not enough.

The law makes us fear punishment. The parable works the same way. Renaissance artists illustrated this parable with those on Jesus’ left being fed into the mouths of demons and dragged into the flames.

When the law shows up people run for the back door. If caught, they lawyer up and build a case for their innocence. The parable leads us to make excuses, to look for a way out, for a way for it not to apply to me. Let’s give that a try. I’ll be our defense attorney. We begin by examining the evidence. Those on Jesus’ right asked, “When was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Jesus calls his disciples “little ones.” It is his pet name for them. Jesus’ disciples are the ones he identifies as his brothers and sisters, members of his family. The king’s judgment is based on how people received Jesus’ disciples. On that day “when the Son of Man comes in his

glory, and all his angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of glory. All the nations will be gathered before him,” and they will be judged on the basis of how they received Jesus’ disciples. They will be judged on the basis of how they receive us.

I have deftly taken us from the hot seat of judgment and perched us above those gathered before the king. They are being judged on how they treated us. Pretty slick, don’t you think? That’s even better than getting a traffic ticket fixed.

“Not so fast,” I can hear the king say. I do think this is a part of what Jesus was aiming at in his parable. The nations of the world will be judged on the basis of how they receive Jesus’ emissaries. We don’t have to go farther into Christian history than the book of Acts to see Jesus’ disciples fit the description of the least of these in the parable. It is a challenge to count up how many times Paul and his co-workers ended up behind bars. Paul’s letters are filled with the names of those who risked their livelihoods and their lives for the sake of the gospel: Barnabas and John Mark, Lydia, Timothy, Eunice and Lois. Thousands followed in the generations after them. Christians today are among those Jesus calls, “the least of these, members of my family,” persecuted for their faith in places like Egypt, Iran, Pakistan. The list is long.

Christians in our own place may not face physical abuse but sometimes contempt is even more powerful. At the beginning of one meeting this week we watched a couple of minutes of an old “Roseanne” TV show. The little boy in the family has been sneaking into a church after school. He has questions about God. When his parents ask him why he didn’t come to them with the questions he says, “Because I thought you’d make fun of me.” We have learned the hard way to keep our faith to ourselves. But disciples can’t do that. It goes against who we are. It violates the vocation we received at our baptism.

“Have we been faithful?” Jesus asks with his parable. When Jesus speaks about the “least of these,” again examining the evidence, he has more than his disciples in his sights. John the Baptist’s disciples came asking, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.’ As disciples we imitate our master’s concern for those one writer refers to as the least, the last, the lost.

All excuses aside, the judgment Jesus aims at us with this parable reduces us to those on his left to whom he says, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” Is there any hope? The only hope is in the teller of the parable. Soon enough he will become the least among us as he is betrayed, arrested, put on trial, abused, crucified between two criminals and buried in a borrowed grave. This One, God’s only begotten Son, God raised from the dead. Paul tells us in the second reading, God “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” And he did so for the sake of his little ones. We proclaim it best in one of our Advent hymns. “He leaves heaven to return; Traveling where dull hellfires burn; Riding out, returning home As the Savior who has come. God the Father’s precious Son Girds himself in flesh to run For the trophies of our souls, Longer than this round earth rolls.” We are God’s trophies.

We say over and over that we are justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God declares us righteous not because of our good works but for Jesus’ sake. But faith does not end here with God’s declaration. Through faith God will make us what God has declared us to be: righteous. How we treat the least among us is one dimension of faith. Faith is one part what we know and affirm with our minds. But faith cannot be all stopped up in our heads. Faith is also

what we feel in our hearts. We long for those heartfelt stirrings. At the same time we know our emotions quickly change. There is more to faith than what we know and what we feel. The third dimension to faith is what we do with what we know and what is in our hearts. How do we live it out?

In the second reading Paul did not stop with Christ the king seated in the heavenly places. He went on to say, God “put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” We are the body of Christ, the fullness of Christ in the world. I’ve never seen a church named “Body of Christ.” We do see it in Latin, Corpus Christi. I was thinking that was the name of the church in Ocean Springs, Mississippi where we first went to help with the recovery from Hurricane Katrina. The inconvenient fact is the name of the church is Christus Victor. But we were Corpus Christi there. We were the body of Christ surging with the fullness of God. Volunteers came in and out every week, the lifeblood of the place. We quite literally clothed the naked, gave food and water to those without; we came as strangers, were welcomed and we turned around and welcomed strangers, another herd of volunteers and another troop of those left homeless by the hurricane.

More often we live it out in ways that are not as dramatic or perhaps as obvious: Practicing the virtues. Return to the Ten Commandments in the catechism with the explanations Luther gives for the “how to” on those. And then there is Jesus’ summation of all the law and prophets, “Love God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves”: volunteering at the food pantry, planning a Faith Perspectives forum on immigration so that we can serve as a public moral companion for our community, setting the table for this meal, which is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, bedside vigils, offering our minds for those beloved ones whose memories are failing them.

These three dimensions of faith have yet a fourth: time. We are in the unique position of knowing how it all turns out: Christ the king, seated in the heavenly places, all things placed in subjection to the Crucified. He still bears the marks by which we identify him, the wounds in his hands and feet, his side and on his brow. Our faithful care for the least gives witness to the coming of Christ the king when there will be no more hunger or strife and every tear will be wiped away. This vision gives us the courage to continue seeking Christ among the least of these.