

Last Sunday in Pentecost
Ephesians 1:15-23, Psalm 100, Matthew 25:31-46
David Teschner
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Today we close out the church year. It is the last Sunday of Pentecost, also called Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday we will start all over again. Let's take a moment to review the six church seasons that comprise the church year. The Christian New Year begins with Advent when we look for the second coming of Christ. Then Christmas begins with God coming to earth in human form. In Epiphany, the third season, we recall those moments when divinity was brightly shining through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In Lent we repent of our sins, and Jesus' earthly life ends on the cross. During Easter Jesus comes back to life in the resurrection and appears to his disciples. And during the last and longest season of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enlivens the church to carry on Jesus' ministry until he returns in glory.

That glory is displayed today by Matthew as Jesus holds court sitting on a throne surrounded by heavenly angels. All the nations, we're told, are gathered before him awaiting judgment. In Matthew's gospel, this is the last teaching Jesus will give before his arrest. It is a grand vision and perhaps an appropriate summary of everything Jesus has said earlier. What will be the final criteria for our approval by God and entrance into the eternal realm? How should God's people and Jesus' disciples behave toward their fellow citizens of earth?

The message couldn't be any clearer. We can't miss the point that we are to be generous and kind, willing to share our time and goods with those who are lacking basic necessities or who need a friend in their time of distress.

The twist in this scenario is that neither the sheep nor the goats realize that their good deeds or lack thereof were done or not done to Jesus himself, the one now sitting on the throne. Jesus has so much compassion for the down and out that he identifies with them completely. They are the closest to his heart.

Someone said in Bible study last week, "I wonder what the world would be like today if everyone treated others as if they were Jesus?" What if we really thought Jesus was most present in the homeless, the poor, those in prison and the stranger or foreigner? Our tendency is to see and think of all these as problems and a drag or impediment to our good life. We want them to change, to be like us. Maybe we need to change in the way we think about them and correspondingly then change in the way we treat them?

It seems to me that one reason we are less compassionate toward those whom Jesus most identifies with is because we have never been in their shoes. For the most part, we have not

been completely without food or clothing, or a glass of water. We haven't been in prison or a stranger in a foreign land unless we've needed help as a tourist somewhere.

The closest I ever came to being without food was on our cross-country bike trip now more than seven years ago. We had biked about 10 miles in the morning to a small town that our map said had a restaurant. When we arrived, the only eating establishment was closed because it was Sunday. We asked if there was any other place and were told that we would have to ride to the next big town at least 25 miles away. To make matters worse, it was starting to rain. We decided to wait out the precipitation in a small park nearby sheltered picnic tables nearby.

Shortly after we arrived there, a pick-up truck stopped, and an older man approached us with some plastic bags in hand. It turns out he had heard we were in town looking for breakfast. He told us that his granddaughter had gotten married the night before, and he was bringing us some food and drinks leftover from the reception. You can imagine our joy and gratitude that someone would go to the trouble to meet the need of four perfect strangers just passing through. Isn't that the beauty of small communities and people who look out for everyone?

Statistics show that people with lower incomes are more generous percentage-wise than people with higher incomes. I think it's because those with less know what it feels like to be without. They really do feel the other's pain.

Whether Jesus was from the poor class, which it seems he was, or made himself poor, he too knew what it was like to live close to the edge of desperation.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a tale about a shoemaker named Martin, who lived in a small cellar apartment in a large city in Russia. The only natural light in his room came from a window just high enough for Martin to see people walking by on the sidewalk.

Martin was a fine and honest craftsman so he had plenty of business. His wife had died early in their marriage and left him with a young son to raise. The boy died at age 13 leaving Martin lonely and depressed. Martin sought out a priest and told him he wanted to die as well. The holy man told him that he still had reason to live and the answer to his troubles lay in God. "When you give yourself to God," the priest said, "you will find your reason to live and get over your great loss."

The priest told Martin to buy a New Testament and read the gospels. Martin did and he could hardly put it down. Day by day his heaviness was lifted and he felt joy again. His work improved as he took great care of his clients' shoes.

One night Martin fell asleep reading from Luke's gospel about a Pharisee who invited Jesus into his home only to disrespect him. He was wondering how he would treat Jesus if he came into his shop when he drifted off. He was suddenly aroused by a voice calling his name, "Martin."

"Who's there?" Martin cried. Not sure whether he was fully awake or still sleeping Martin heard the same voice say, "Martin, look out in the street tomorrow. I will come and visit you."

Suddenly Martin was fully awake. Who had spoken to him? Was it Christ or had he imagined it?

The next day as he worked at his bench near the window, his mind was not on shoes. Like a school boy he looked out the window hoping to see the Lord. What he did see was old Stephen who kept the sidewalks clear of snow in front of his building. He looked especially cold and weary that morning as he leaned on his shovel. Martin wrapped on the glass and motioned for him to come in to get warm and have a cup of tea.

As old Stephen gratefully drank the hot tea, Martin continued to glance out the window. Stephen asked if he was expecting someone and Martin told him the whole story from the night before. Not being able to read, Stephen was thrilled to hear the story from the Bible about Jesus. Martin told him other gospel stories as well.

When Stephen got up to leave, he thanked Martin for nourishing both his body and his soul. By now it was late morning and Martin was a bit disappointed that Jesus had not yet come.

As Martin continued to stare out the window, he could see a woman with an infant. She was poorly dressed with her back to the wind to shield the child from the severe cold. Martin went to the door and beckoned her to come inside. She told Martin that her husband had gone off to war. She was a cook but was laid off after their baby was born four months ago. She had come to this city hoping to find work. Without success, she had had to sell the last of her warm clothes for food.

Martin fixed them lunch and gave her some of his meager savings to pay for a month's lodging at a nearby inn. He also gave her a winter coat that had been his wife's as well as a warm blanket for the baby.

By the time she left it was now nearly dark. Martin felt a little foolish that he had believed that Jesus might actually come and visit him, a poor shoemaker and repairman.

After his dinner of cabbage soup, he sat down to read his New Testament. He opened to Matthew chapter 25 and read for the first time, "Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and give you clothing? And when did we saw you sick or in prison and we visited you?" And the King will answer them,

“Truly I tell you when you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Images of old Stephen and the woman and child flashed across Martin’s mind. He then knew that his dream had not deceived him; the savior had surely come to him that day, and he had received him.

May we continue to do likewise. AMEN.