

Christ the King
Year A 2017

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Matthew 25:31-46

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Let us start by framing the context
for today's passage from the prophet Ezekiel.

Commentator Margaret Odell offers:

Ezekiel 34 identifies injustice and oppression as a primary cause of the fragmentation of any community, not least God's people.

The prophet Ezekiel recounts for us
the story of those who have been dispersed through exile.

They have experienced great suffering and humiliation
and Ezekiel sets forth for us God's response.

It is made clear to us through the words of the prophet Ezekiel
that God is intent on attending to their needs.

This passage from Ezekiel assures us that
God is preeminently concerned with
the well-being of the victims in the world.

We hear this passage in the framework of a flock of sheep.

It is important to note,
that the original hearers
to whom Ezekiel was directing this
revelation of God's word
would have understood that a shepherd
was metaphor for king.

This passage from Ezekiel makes clear
God's care and concern for the powerless
and the victimized is both
implicitly and explicitly associated with justice.

In verse 16 we hear:

*I will seek the lost,
and I will bring back the strayed,
and I will bind up the injured,
and I will strengthen the weak,
but the fat and the strong I will destroy.
I will feed them with justice.*

God created all humanity for each other and for God.

Any abuse by one against another
stands in direct opposition to
God's loving intent for all humanity.

This exercise of power has fragmented the human community,
isolating one from one another,
leaving people scattered, injured, and alone.

God has created all with the intent that there be justice among all creation.

Those in exile, and those in power, would have heard Ezekiel's words as an indictment on those who abused their power to the detriment of those in their care.

For example, Hammurabi, invoked the shepherd metaphor in the preface to his Law Code, and explaining that he was appointed by the gods:

“to promote the welfare of the people, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil that the strong might not oppress the weak.”

Thus, God's anger and judgment arises from the abuses by those in power who have been tasked by God to insure there is justice for all of the people so that all might thrive.

Margaret Odell again:

Christiansfind countless ways to practice charity through any number of food drives and mission trips.

We do not, however, always tend to the underlying causes of these great needs.

By contrast, today's lesson from Ezekiel holds justice and care together.

This leads us directly to today's Gospel.

We most often hear today's Gospel as a judgment on the followers of Christ.

Some even believe it to be particularly applicable to the disciples.

And, in fact, this section of Matthew is actually referred to as "The judgment."

It is important to note, that there are scholars who urge readers to hear this last teaching of Jesus through Matthew's lens.

How does that change the way in which we have heard this passage over time?

To begin, note that Jesus begins by referring to "all the nations."

Depending on different scholars, Jesus' judgment is either being directed at all nations or, at a minimum, the gentiles.

Remember, that in Matthew's time, the church was under great persecution.

Jesus had been crucified and resurrected but had not yet come again as he foretold.

The temple had been destroyed
by the Romans and
there was a power struggle amongst Matthew's community.

Within that framework,
we hear Jesus' vision about
the ethics of all nations to
the least, the powerless, the victims.

For Matthew, Jesus is about
empowering and equipping
those who are persecuted and victimized
by those who abuse their power.

This fact is highlighted by Jesus
as he separates the sheep and goats.

Both the gentiles and the church
seem unaware of their complicity
in their abuses and neglect of
the least, the last, and the powerless.

Jesus is focusing all who follow him and hear him
on God's intent that all humanity
has a responsibility to care for
the hungry, thirsty, stranger, ill and imprisoned.

All of humanity, created by a loving God,
has the responsibility to insure that
there is justice among all people.

Let us not forget,
that we are to even love our enemies.

Even Matthew's community,
suffering under persecution,
is to love their enemies.

For those of us who live fairly comfortably,
not residing in war ravaged countries,
having shelter, food, and clothing,
it is hard to imagine the effect of Jesus' words
on the original hearers of this judgment.

Imagine, knowing there were those
who actively wanted to take your life,
and being told that you needed to insure
that the least among those who persecuted you
were still your responsibility.

You were responsible to do all you could
to insure that God's justice was available to all.

What does that mean for us here today
as a community of Christians,
a community that professes
to follow the teachings of Christ,
a community that professes to be engaged
in the renewal of the world?

Do we understand that justice
and care cannot be separated?

That there cannot be justice for the hungry
if we only stock the shelves at MetroCaring?

That there cannot be justice for the least
if we only donate funds to support
Colorado Haiti Project and Project South Sudan?

That there cannot be justice for the persecuted,
the unsheltered, the lonely and lost
if we only say we offer sanctuary?

You've heard me say this before,
we simply cannot end hunger by stocking food banks.

We must be engaged in the work
of insuring that those in power
use it responsibly to the benefit of all,
especially the hungry among us.

There is more than enough food produced to feed everyone.

We need to change the policies
and processes where it is deemed
more financially expedient to
throw food away than to feed the hungry.

While Colorado Haiti Project and
Project Education South Sudan
have had much success in their programs
educating and empowering Haitians and
South Sudanese that is simply not enough.

It is incumbent on us to insure that those who have come to this country for refuge are able to live in communities in which they are able to thrive.

That all those who seek to live in a nation where they feel safe are not suffering persecution by those in power.

It simply is not enough for us to say we offer sanctuary.

We must be more fully engaged in standing with our unsheltered, LGBTQ, immigrant and elderly neighbors to insure that acts of discrimination, persecution or violence cease.

We must insure that they are able to live in a community in which they can flourish.

Jesus' words are straightforward and clear:

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.

In the words of Karoline Lewis:

Why is this passage apropos for this Sunday?

Because Jesus' says to us,

"if you do not see or experience the reign of Christ in your life, before you cast culpability elsewhere, you better first examine yourself."

*If you have to ask Jesus, “when was it...?”
you are not paying attention.*

*Furthermore, if you have to ask Jesus, “when was it...?”
you really do not believe that
your actions make a difference
for moving Christ’s reign to its fullest expression and presence.*

*“When was it?” is never a question
for those who are certain of God’s sovereignty
and God’s activity in this world,
even though all evidence points to the contrary.*

*“When was it?” is never a question for
those who are convinced that
the commission to be the salt of the earth
and the light of the world is no mere euphemistic claim.*

Jesus’ words are straightforward and clear:

**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.**

No footnotes, no exceptions, no excuses.