

Gracious God, our king, our judge, our savior and our friend – we breathe and it is your breath that fills us, we look and it is your light by which we see, we move and it is your energy moving in us. Thank you for life. Amen.

This morning we heard a reading from Matthew that is one of the stories that form the heart of the Gospel message. It says in essence that God will judge us less by what we think or what we believe and more by what we do. There's no mention in here of only Jesus' followers going to heaven and everyone else going to hell. There's no mention of a statement of faith that you must attest to. In the end, it's not our titles, accomplishments, stock portfolios, what church we belonged to or even, and this hurts me to say it, how regularly we went to church. It's how we treat other people. Especially, people who have great needs – who have no money or food or who are in pain, who are unable to take care of themselves.

The author of Matthew makes it all pretty black and white. Here are the criteria for either life or eternal agony. If you meet the criteria, you're off to heaven. If you don't meet the criteria, you're off to hell. Using Matthew's description, I imagine God with a big ledger. Along the side are all of our names. Along the top are 6 columns headed "Hungry, Thirsty, Strangers, The naked, The sick, Prisoners." As each of us does something like feeding a hungry person or caring for a sick person, a check goes into that column. So it will be very easy when we die and come face to face with God, God can look down at all the check marks or at all the empty spaces next to our name and know at a glance where we deserve to go. That sounds simple, right? Of course it's not that simple. Are the 6 activities he listed the only ones that determine whether we go to heaven or hell? What if we tutor children or work with troubled adolescents or dig and plant trees for our communities? Do those activities count? And secondly, do we just need one check in each column

to earn our way into heaven?

One visit to a prison, a set of clothes to one naked person.

Once we've done those 6 things are we off the hook,

free to carouse and be selfish the rest of our days?

But I'm turning Matthew's gospel into a kind of parody of what he meant.

I think he would have readily agreed that there are many ways

we can serve those who do not have enough.

He was just giving some ideas of ways we can respond.

What I think the author of Matthew most wanted to convey

is that an encounter with Jesus on earth placed a person in a crisis of decision.

The encounter with Jesus causes us to reassess our lives.

It is a call to relationship with him which leads us

to a relationship with everyone else.

And the cruelest twist is that in this time when so many people have needs,  
helping them is harder than ever.

Social distancing frustrates many things we would like to do for others.

What motivates us to help other?

For some of us it's mostly guilt.

Others by a kind of begrudging, I'm a Christian so I'd better do something good.

Those acts are usually done through gritted teeth.

I am familiar with that syndrome because it has characterized a lot of my giving.

Some of us give to keep up with others, strange as that sounds.

Some of us have a strong need to please or to be accepted  
and those are our prime motivations.

There is nothing bad about those motivations, nothing bad. I want to be clear.

But there is another kind of giving that is the most wonderful of all.

That is the kind of generosity that Jesus hopes for us.

That is what he came to show us and to help us with.

It is giving unattached to any psychological need or societal pressure.

It is completely free. A free and beautiful choice.

It is giving without expectation, without compulsion,

Not only is Jesus our model for this kind of service,

he is also in us and with us to help us find that freedom of generosity.

When we attend a service or when we sit in prayer and silence,

We share in his life and he becomes an inner resource for us

so that, in doing the things he talks about, his spirit energizes us.

And as we begin to hear him, experience him, to cooperate with him,

he gently pushes us to move outwards in an expanding circle of opportunities

to serve and to grow.

The kingdom of heaven that Jesus ushered in  
has an ethical or personal dimension  
that inspires us to reassess almost every aspect of our lives.  
It tunes our ears to different melodies, our eyes to different images.  
Because I think before we begin doing these good and noble things,  
we literally have to see the world in a new way.  
It's easy to ignore or literally not see  
the people and situations around us that need help.  
We see the guy on the street corner with the handmade sign  
but we are careful not to meet his eyes.  
We maintain a distance between us. Why don't I look into his eyes?  
Because if I do, it might create a connection between us and that means  
I might have to dig in my purse and find some money to give him.  
Or maybe, if I looked into his eyes, I might see something that we both share –  
a pain, a hurt, a need that means we aren't all that different.  
That homeless man knows, much better than I do,  
how tenuous my hold on security is.  
I may have a house, a car, a job but all of those can disappear almost instantly.  
We don't want to be reminded of how little separates us from warm beds  
to sleeping on cardboard under a bridge on Cherry Creek.  
So I think it's what we choose to see and hear,  
what we are willing to see and hear,  
that is the first step in reaching out to others.  
And I think the author of Matthew knew that well too.  
Look at the wording in this passage.  
“Lord, when was it that we **saw** you hungry and gave you food...  
And when was it we **saw** you a stranger... And when was it we **saw** you sick...”  
Matthew could have worded this so differently, like,  
When did we give you food when you were hungry?  
But no, we literally have to see something maybe we never saw before,  
before we can take that next step of helping.  
That verb he uses isn't the normal verb to see, optanomai, as in ophthalmologist.  
No, it's a different verb to see that includes being aware,  
perceiving, understanding.  
Understanding the depth of the need.  
Allowing us to see it first with the eyes in our heads  
and then with the eyes of our hearts,  
as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians.

Before Covid hit, I worked one day a week at the St. Francis Center,  
as some of you do.  
St. Francis is a day shelter for homeless people that, I'm proud to say,  
is one of the ministries of our diocese.  
There can be several 100 people there at any one time so when you walk in,  
you see everyone kind of blurred together in one big group.  
But they don't blend together for long.  
When they come up to get their storage bags or mail or shampoo  
we learn their names and sometimes hear their stories and that changes everything.  
Each face itself tells a story and the themes are often sadness or pain or hardship.  
Their hands are usually rough and red, calloused with chipped nails.  
Sometimes they're covered in dirt.  
Their hair is untouched by Clairol to hide the grey.  
In the lack of pretension, in their just being who they are,  
there is a kind of truth that is, I don't know, freeing in some way,  
restful in some way. Kind of like being in the presence of Jesus.  
They just peel open the eyes of my heart every time, every time..

I became a priest because Jesus is the most real and the most true thing I know,  
the grammar section of Word prefers truest but too bad.  
That truth and that reality reign, even when they seem so distant and distorted.  
Today, Christ the King Sunday, is a feast day  
to celebrate the eternal and gracious authority of Christ.  
Christ as King may not be the most helpful image.  
I like to think of Jesus as my North Star, an image used in the wonderful  
Unbinding the Gospel series.  
When Jesus is our North Star then we make his values of love and truth,  
compassion and inclusion active and real.  
Jesus as our fixed point in the sky, is the light that we navigate our lives by.  
When everything seems impossibly chaotic and scary and threatening,  
we can look up into the night sky and know that there is a fixed point of light  
which is our truest and most reliable guide,  
Jesus, whose life and death and everpresent spirit  
call us to a life of meaning in the world.