Matthew 25:31-46

31 ‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for 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,36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” 37Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” 40And 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.” 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” 44Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” 45Then he will answer them, “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.” 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

We Meet Christ in One Another

As today is Christ the King Sunday, our Gospel lesson is rather appropriate: Jesus is speaking about the time when the “Son of Man” comes in glory to judge the world. The Son of Man will separate sheep from goat. Some make it into his kingdom. Others go away to eternal punishment.

This passage speaks of a rather frightening event: judgment. And the thought of judgment makes us squirm. We can console ourselves into believing that we are going to be among the sheep who are saved, but any honest self-assessment tells us otherwise. Too often we neglect the poor and the hungry and the marginalized, and troubles our spirit that we all seem to be destined for the eternal punishment – none of us get a perfect score on the righteousness test.

How do we as Christians approach this image of judgment, knowing that we likely don’t make the cut? Some would reject the whole notion of eternal punishment, saying that an all-loving God would not allow any person to suffer such a fate. God grades on a curve; we may not be perfect, but if we’re basically good people, we are saved. Others reject the whole notion of judgment; a loving and all-powerful God does not cast anyone off into eternal darkness. All are purified and enter the kingdom of God. All Christians can appeal to God’s grace, claiming that it is by our faith and not our works that we are saved.

But this passage implies exactly that it *is* works, giving to those in need, that determines whether we’re saved or damned. These words of Jesus in today’s passage still make us uncomfortable about the standard of behavior expected of the righteous. How can we show compassion to “the least of these,” those we detest? Even those who are generous are selective with their generosity, distributing their time and energy and resources amongst the more “deserving,” the less repulsive people who inhabit the planet. All of us can think of those we have shirked, or worse, despised.

There is another, more subtle difficulty with this passage: Many look upon this as a teaching – Jesus telling us to treat others as if they were him. But what Jesus is telling us is not the imperative: “Treat others as you would treat me.” Rather it’s a statement: “You treat me the way you treat others.”

If it were a teaching, there would be two problems with it: the first problem is that unless we know Jesus, we don’t know how to treat Jesus. We sometimes think we know Jesus – we convince ourselves that through our prayers and devotionals we do indeed know Jesus, but any honest Christians knows that Jesus has a habit of surprising us, of humbling us, of exposing us to sin that we had not recognized. And because we always seem to lag behind in knowing Jesus, we also lag behind in our treatment of others.

The other problem is that if we look at this as a lesson, as Jesus teaching us, “treat others as you would treat me,” our actions toward others are motivated not by a sincere concern for others but by a fear of punishment from God. “Treat others well, OR ELSE!” And if we treated others as we believed we should treat Jesus in order to escape damnation, then the judgment scene that Jesus describes would certainly play out much differently; when Jesus says, “come to me…for when I was hungry you fed me…” we wouldn’t be puzzled and ask, “When did we do this?”

The beauty of this story lies in the blindness of the good sheep, the fact that the righteous don’t know that it is Christ who they are serving when they “do this unto the least of these,” nor do the wicked when they “don’t do unto the least of these.” Both the sheep the goats are surprised, as many people are when they encounter the true Christ. We usually have some preconceptions of Jesus – wise, loving, forgiving, having supernatural powers (too often we think of his attributes as qualities he can bestow upon US!), and because he is our judge, we try to get on his good side, to coddle his favor. I enjoyed the subplot in Episode 2 of Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. Luke Skywalker is sent to Dagobah to find the Jedi Master, Yoda. Shortly after his arrival, Luke is menaced by a little green creature that gets into his food, keeps asking him annoying questions, and just plain gets on Luke’s nerves. Well, Luke later finds out that the annoying green creature *is* the Jedi master Yoda. I think many of us could share stories like this. Our expectations are shattered, often to our own embarrassment or shame. Sadly, most of us behave more like the goats than the sheep most of the time – treating others based upon the potential benefits we gain. “The least of these” are the least precisely because they offer the least potential payoff – we stand to gain “the least” from them. Therefore most we offer them is “the least.”

But it is precisely the least with whom Jesus identifies. Jesus says, “They are me!” Inasmuch as you’ve done this for them, you’ve done it for me. If you feed them, if you give them drink, if you welcome them, you welcome Jesus; and if you deny them, reject them, turn them away, guess what?

It seems utterly impossible for most of us to live as Jesus’ sheep: Not only are we expected to serve “the least of these;” we are also expected to serve them without personal incentive, without the thought that we’re serving Christ. We’re supposed to care for others strictly on the basis of who they are, not who they represent, and when we can care for “the least of these” in all sincerity, without selfish, ulterior motives, we care in the same way Christ cares, unconditionally. And when our love is unconditional, we certainly meet Christ. If we insist upon discriminating, if we remain selective in who we care about, we remain unable to know Christ.

How is this possible? You can’t force yourself to love another, particularly another who smells bad, who has no social skills, who is ornery, and selfish, and prideful, and manipulative, and whatever else.

Yet this is exactly what Jesus has done. What God has done. How do we know that God’s love is genuine and perfect? Because he could love creatures such as ourselves to the point of humiliation, suffering, and death, and even plead for our forgiveness in the midst of that humiliation and suffering and loneliness. God completely empties himself, becoming “the least of these” for us, in order that we might see His glory, his love that cannot be withheld, in order that we might recognize that Jesus is our Lord and that you and I who could not recognize his glory on the cross, WE are truly “the least of these,” undeserving of God’s love, but loved nonetheless.

And it’s that love that transforms us, that takes us out of our pathetic condition as we come to terms with God’s love for us and we find our worth in Christ. We see ourselves as Christ sees us, beautiful in God’s eyes. Then we can see others in the same way, no longer as objects to exploit or annoyances to be avoided, but children of God in need of love.

My experience is that loving others, particularly “the least of these,” is not something that comes naturally for us. I believe we have to work at it. We have to willfully face and serve those who we wish to serve the least. We have to break out of our comfort zone and face our own fears and prejudices in order for God to shake our preconceptions and dispel our fears. But in time, the Holy Spirit reshapes our hearts and empowers us to love those who we never believed it was possible to love.

So share your food, water, time and energy with those you might normally avoid until you no longer feel any impulse to avoid them. May your heart be led by Christ to love “the least of these” as he too loves us.