

Our Genuine Response©

Matthew 25:31-46

November 20, 2011

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Today is one of those Sunday's when there are several themes floating around.

First of all, did you realize this is New Year's Eve? It is! At least it is the last Sunday of the liturgical year – if we follow the Christian calendar and the common lectionary. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, which begins a new year on the Christian calendar.

So, Happy Christian New Year!

Today – the last Sunday of the Christian year is known as Christ the King Sunday. We have spent the year studying and growing and learning as disciples of Jesus and today we proclaim again that Christ is the king of our hearts and our lives.

And what better day could there be for making our stewardship pledges, but on the day when we confess that there is no other king, no other god in our lives, but Christ? This is the day when we, in faith and trust, write down our commitment, our pledge of what we plan to give, out of our income for the coming year.

It isn't always easy to make that commitment. These days are so uncertain with our economy, our jobs, and the stock market, it would be easy to say that we are not going to try and make that commitment this year.

And yet we do it anyway. We do it because we know that we can trust God to take care of us. We know that, as we step out in faith, God is faithful to provide, and the Holy Spirit is growing us and strengthening our faith as we take that step.

And the more we continue to trust, the more Christ really does become the King of our lives.

Today, we had the great privilege and pleasure of receiving a new member into our church family. Charlee has been a long time Christian and church member, but she still, was pleased to make that pledge – that public vow of faithfulness and trust in the Lord and in serving as a dedicated member of this congregation.

It is a very meaningful thing to hear those vows again, especially on this day when we all are making a pledge to God. We are promising to do our best to be faithful and to keep our commitment, with God's help.

Our commitment in tithing or giving a certain amount to God, means we, as members of this particular church, give to the church to support the ministry we believe Christ has called us to. It is for the spiritual growth and nurturing of our members through pastoral leadership, teaching and study. It provides a place for fellowship together.

And just as important, it allows us to reach out to others in ministries that are compassionate and loving, that share the good news of Jesus Christ; it helps us to feed the hungry, offer clothing, and help and support to those who are having a struggle in their lives.

Our passage from Matthew this morning is one that is very clear on just how important that is to the one whom we claim is the King of our lives – Jesus Christ.

In fact, Jesus says there will be a day when the King comes again in all His glory to welcome his children into his Kingdom. He calls them sheep, using the shepherd metaphor that is so prominent in the Bible.

The sheep he gathers to his right and says to them:

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’

But all those sheep will be surprised and ask when they did this? They don’t recall ever seeing Jesus hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or a stranger, or sick.

And Jesus tells them “if you did it to others – to the least of these – you did it to me.”

What stands out for me in this is that those who found favor with the King did not intentionally do these good deeds to win his favor. They did it with authentic care and compassion for those they helped. They are surprised to learn that they were actually doing for Jesus when they were caring for others.

Of course, Matthew has us hear Jesus say to those on his left – the goats! – You ignored me. You saw me hungry, but gave me nothing to eat. You saw me thirsty and never offered me a drink, sick and never helped me, naked, but never gave me clothes.

These goats are equally surprised by Jesus’ statement, asking the same question as the sheep – WHEN, Lord? When did we ever see you hungry, thirsty, sick, naked or in prison?

It’s kind of like they want to say, “Surely you know that if we’d seen you like that, we would have done something!”

“Ah, but every time you saw someone else in need and refused them,” Jesus says, “You also refused me.”

And they are sent away from him because they did not have the hearts and minds of Christ himself.

If Christ is the king of our lives, our hearts, our minds – then we act like him – not because we will get a reward someday, but because our hearts are on fire with his love and compassion for people, especially for those in need, those who are hurting, those who suffer.

Dr. John Jewell, one of my instructors during my doctoral studies, wrote this in his sermon on the Epistle letter, written by Paul and read today by Mandie: “A church which is alive with faith and living in the love of the Holy Spirit is the joy of God's heart!

The mark of an authentic faith, is not in the way a church worships, nor is it the way people talk about faith... the mark of a living faith is the ongoing transformation of lives. The mark of genuine love is not simply the way we appreciate each other and try to like each other. The love of God is something Paul said, "*...has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*"

It is in this transformation we experience in Christ's love for us, that causes us to have that same love for others.

I believe that our giving to the church helps to build up the ministry that we are called to by the one who is the Head of the Church, who calls us into being and who gives us our purpose for existing.

That purpose could not be more clear than it is in this passage. We grow Christians here in Christ's church – strong disciples, who take on the genuine love and compassion of the one we follow – Jesus Christ – the King of our lives.

This morning, we have the great privilege of making our offerings to Him in a physical movement that means coming to the table. Bringing our morning offerings and placing them in the offering plates, but also bringing our pledge cards and laying them down as an act of offering our commitments to the Lord.

In our baptism we made vows – or our parents did for us, and we confirmed them later – vows to be faithful disciples, to put our trust in Jesus Christ. This morning, you have the opportunity to touch the waters of baptism as an act of remembering and dedicating your commitments, your life and your pledge to Him.

We consecrate these gifts before the Lord. And even more, we dedicate our hearts, our trust in Him, as King of our life.

Thanks be to God for giving us His Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for us as our good Shepherd and as our King. Amen.

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