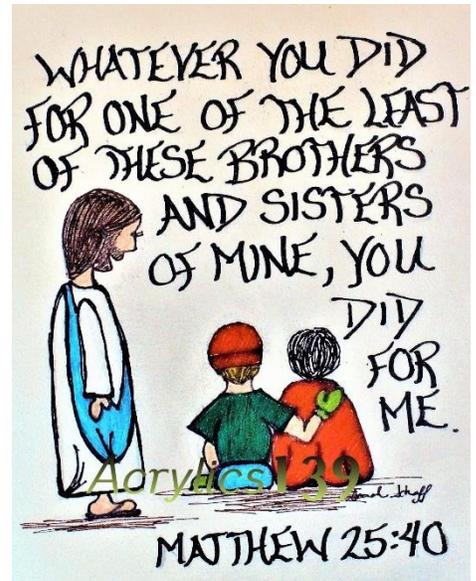


Sunday, November 22, 2020
Sermon: From Individual to National Responsibility
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Today we celebrate Thanksgiving and Christ the King Sunday. If you are like me, "King" language for God is a bit problematic, as it can feel authoritarian. But this is a day to remind ourselves that Jesus is a different kind of king - a different kind of Messiah. And for that, we can be thankful.

Friends, this is a tricky passage as our dear sister, Emily, noted (Matthew 25:31-46). Part of me loves this passage and part of me stumbles over it. I'm gonna try to get to all of that. This is often called the final judgment where Jesus tells this story about the sheep and the goats and it's complicated. It's a very controversial passage when it comes to scholarship, so even the scholars debate what's happening and what news is going on in this passage. But there are a few points that I want to make. First, Jesus comes and tells this story near the end of his life and it's important to note a couple of things at the beginning of this passage. This is being told here today in this context on a Sunday that is a holy day in the church calendar called Christ the King Sunday. What I want you to know is that Jesus was political. Much of Christianity has taken the politics out of the message of Jesus. I'm going to show you how that happens in this passage. What we have done with this passage is to make it so that it doesn't have anything to do with the nations, but has everything to do with individual actions and that is a misreading of this text.

In the beginning of this passage, Jesus says that the nation will be brought before the son of man for judgment. "Nations" here is a loaded political term in the ancient Hebrew understanding. "Nations" is not primarily about individual acts. Nations is about how a nation behaves - national policies. In Jesus's day, you would call these empires. How do the empires treat one another? How do the empires treat those who are most vulnerable within their midst? Now here's where the trick is in this passage. I had Sharon emphasize the word "people." As the translation comes in, it says that Jesus brings the nations before him. And then our translation says "and separates the people from one another," but "people" is not in the original language. The word "people" is not there. See, we translate this word "people" and it really means "them." It refers back to the nations. It does not refer to individual people. It refers to national policies. What have you done as a nation? How have your leaders cared for those who are most vulnerable in their midst? That is what the nations are going to be judged by. And so, when Jesus continues and says - I was hungry and you didn't feed me, I was thirsty and you didn't give me water, I was naked and you didn't give me clothing, he's talking primarily about the nations, the governmental systems that cared for the most vulnerable. So, that's the first point that I want to make.



Is there a responsibility that I have as an individual, or that you have as an individual? Yes, of course. But Jesus here is being political. Even when Jesus says that the King will be there, this is political language. Many within Christian tradition, especially in American Christianity, have wanted to re-politicize the message of Jesus and make it just about the individual.

There's a man named Jim Wallace who has a blog in the magazine called *The Sojourners*. Jim Wallace is an evangelical Christian who has been a spiritual advisor to many presidents, including George W. Bush. Here is how this happens, this individualizing and de-politicizing of the gospel. Jim Wallace went to George W. Bush at the beginning of his presidency and said – we need to care for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. He took Matthew 25 to the President. In the beginning of his presidency, Bush said – yes, let's do that. Four years later, Jim Wallace went back to George W. Bush and said – hey, we need to do Matthew 25 and care for people. George W. Bush ended up going to Jim Wallace and saying – no, that's why we need you. That's why we need clergy. To tell people, individuals, that it is your responsibility to care for the poor and the vulnerable. It's not the "nation's" responsibility.

Many of my Christian siblings have tried to make this not about the nations, not about political systems, but rather about individuals and churches doing charity. Notice what this does – it makes it so that nations don't have to live towards justice. They can emphasize the individual acts of charity. And that is not what this passage is about. This passage is about justice. This passage is about how nations care for the most vulnerable in their midst. So, as a pastor, I want to tell you that if Jesus was here today he would say this to the United States – I was a black man and you shot me, I was a brown child and you separated me from my parents, I was sick and you crippled me with medical debt, I was a transgender woman and you murdered me, I was a gay couple and you wouldn't even bake me a cake, I was hungry and you took away my food stamps, I had pre-existing conditions and you refused to wear a mask.

Jesus says that he is in the most vulnerable members of every society. Where do you want to find God in the world? You find God in the world in the most vulnerable. This is the flip that Jesus is making. We typically think that we find God in the most powerful. No. You find God in the most vulnerable. Each nation will be judged by how it treats the most vulnerable. The United States will be judged by how we treated the most vulnerable. So, when we're talking about policies and candidates and who to vote for, we need to keep that in mind because politics matters to God. It matters to Jesus. And I want to get at Emily's great question about the fire at the end. Nations, and many of us, will have to go through the fire. The fire of what Jesus calls his final judgment. That fire is maybe eternal, but throughout the scriptures, fire doesn't have the last word. Fire throughout the scriptures is a purifying agent. Fire burns up that in which is inside of us that stops us from caring for the poor and the weak and the marginalized. That stops us from caring for those who are vulnerable.

We are experiencing that fire now as a nation. We have always experienced that fire in the United States. When you look back at our history of slavery, the fire burned during the Civil War – before and after. The fire of racism continues to burn until we get that figured out. We're going through the fire as people are suffering from economic debt. That is a fire that is burning the most vulnerable and it should be burning all of us because you see Jesus in the most vulnerable. We are suffering through the fire of houselessness in the United States. The country that is the richest country in the world, and we can't house Jesus who is in our houseless neighbors. We can, I shouldn't say we can't, we just refuse to. We would much rather blame the Jesus who is in our houseless neighborhood than help the Jesus who is in

our houseless neighbors. We continue to suffer as Covid 19 rates skyrocket here in Oregon. We have politicians here in Clackamas County who continue to say that they are going to have as many people at their Thanksgiving party as they can find, as many family members and friends as they can find, even making it on Fox News to give this message. It's outrageous!

Jesus comes and says it was in the vulnerable you refused to wear a mask, you refused to care for one another, and instead you continued with your holiday plans.

Listen, this is hard. This is hard. I miss my family. I know you all miss your families. We're going through a time of fire when we're shutting things down and we have politicians who are refusing to provide economic relief to people for political reasons. We're being judged by that.

This fire that we are experiencing, this fire that's eternal, eternal in the United States because we need to deal with these justice issues and that's our role because that is what God is calling us to do. Not simple acts of individual charity, but acts of justice that transform unjust systems.

So friends, may we continue on this Christ the King Sunday to proclaim that Jesus is the one who leads us into the realm of God. The Kingdom of God where everyone is treated with love and respect. Where we don't emphasize our own individual freedom to wear a mask, or not wear a mask, but we live in a community of love and so, of course, we're gonna wear a mask. May we continue to work for a more loving and just world now and forevermore. Amen

