

11/22/20

Maricopa Lutheran Church, AZ

Festival Christ the King, Matthew 25:31-46

Today we celebrate that Jesus is King. This is a strange celebration for a man who was turned over by religious leaders to be executed by the government, especially since one disciple betrayed him, another denied him, and all but one abandoned him. It's a strange celebration for a King whose world is in such a terrible mess now. It's stranger yet that this man rose from the dead, gave his Holy Spirit, and promises to come again to finish changing all creation into a new heaven and a new earth.

Today, our King gives us a challenging parable. It sounds simple, with straightforward examples of giving to people in need. How complicated can that be?

Well, maybe it's a lot more complicated than it seems. For example, Jesus said to feed the hungry. St. Paul wrote that those who are unwilling to work should not eat. Maybe both are right, depending.

Back in Pittsburgh, I visited a sweet lady who proudly told me that she paid her grandson's drunk driving tickets. When she saw the look on my face, she explained, "Isn't this what Jesus taught us to do?" I replied rather bluntly, "Paying his drunk driving tickets is like paying him to drive drunk."

To her credit, she told her grandson that she wouldn't do it again. She sent him to see me, and he arrived at my office. The good news is that he eventually wound up in rehab.

Here's another dilemma. Do you pay ransom to a kidnapper? If you do, you help make kidnapping profitable, and it's more likely to happen to other people. But if it's my

loved one, I just might go against my better judgment and pay, if I could raise the money, which is pretty unlikely. The examples could go on and on.

Jesus gives us a road sign about where he wants us to go, that we do deeds of love for others as we would do for him. But Jesus does not give us a detailed map. He did not tell us which deed fits which need in each particular case. We Christians have been having plenty of arguments with each other about which approaches really help or not in our nation and world.

With all this uncertainty, how do we live in the real world now as loyal followers of our King? Since Jesus didn't give simple answers, I wouldn't dare. But there are some basic principles that make sense to me. They have to do with how our hearts, our heads, and our eyes, can guide our hands.

First is to get our hearts more lined up with Jesus. If we really don't want to help somebody, we always can come up with reasonable excuses not to. At the other extreme, if we want to dodge the dangers of saying no, we always can make excuses for something popular that really would do more harm than good. Whether we do too little or too much, it's about us.

This parable makes it all about Jesus, so that we focus first on him. Jesus takes how we treat other people personally, as though we were treating him that way. The goal is what's actually good for the other person, whether we like that person or not, whether it makes us look good or not, whether we say yes or no. Tender love and tough love both have to be love.

Reading the Bible, receiving the Sacrament, and prayer are just a few very important ways that we can open our hearts to Jesus so that he can make them new. That's always

the best place to start, but Jesus won't let us stop there, for he is always ahead of us in caring for others.

This leads to us using our heads to suit the deed to the need. The lady who paid her grandson's drunk driving tickets had a loving heart, and she was willing for her head to have an adjustment.

I see her openness as an example for us. We can listen to those with good information, in order to determine what mostly works and what mostly does not. We can consider the opinions of those who have different ideas about what really helps or what actually sows the seeds of unintended consequences. Always, we can pray for guidance, so that the willingness of our hearts is matched by the wisdom of our heads.

Third, we can open our eyes to look around to see how Jesus is ruling this world now through us Christians as we channel his love through our hands. You've probably heard the old story of a man who asked God why he let so many people go hungry, and God replied that he was about to ask the man the same question.

It's about more than checking the boxes of personal morality. It's also about how God's Kingdom comes through our hands, even with all of our failings and mixed motives. It's not that we're so effective. Rather, it's that God chooses to be effective through us. The bonus is that God transforms us as he works through us to love others.

We also can use our eyes to look ahead and see the vision of what God has promised to do. Sooner or later, one way or another, God's Kingdom shall come completely, and God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus shall come again, raise the dead, and finish the job. When he does, our eyes will be opened to see how he moved the hands of ordinary people who did the ordinary deeds of simple human decency. We

don't have to be heroes who make the nightly news. We just have to do our parts, so that people receive the love of Jesus through us.

In these ways and more, the mercy we receive flows through the mercy we give, and the power of our Lord's death and resurrection transforms us and those whose lives we touch. So each and every day, we can take our own personal inventory of how we are offering our hearts, our heads, our eyes, and our hands for King Jesus to use to rule his world.

Who would have thought that a man who died on a cross is King of Creation and Savior of the World? Who would have thought that he is personally present in those who are in greatest need? Who would have thought that God the Son would work through ordinary sinners like us?

We have a surprising God. Good Friday and Easter were surprises. So was Pentecost. So is how he keeps renewing our hearts, our minds, our eyes, and our hands.

The biggest surprise of all shall be when Jesus comes again and makes all things new. Then all the whole world shall see that he is the real King of Heaven and Earth for all of eternity. Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen livingsystemsconsult@gmail.com