

Sermon for Sunday, November 22, 2020 - "Encountering Jesus"

Christ the King Sunday
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When you think about Jesus, what images come to mind for you? Do you picture Jesus smiling while holding a sheep, surrounded by children, teaching on a mountainside, walking across the water? Does your mind go to a beloved stained glass window or a painting behind an altar? Those all are powerful images of Jesus, but they only tell part of the story.

Now call to mind:

- a homeless person with a sign asking for food,
- a child with a distended belly in a refugee camp,
- an undocumented immigrant with fear in her eyes,
- or a prisoner on death row.

Hold those pictures in your mind for a while because they, too, are images of Jesus. In this parable today, Jesus makes it clear that when we look at the face of a person in need, we glimpse Jesus' face as well. It can be startling to envision Jesus this way.

In the past decade, sculptures of a homeless Jesus have been unsettling people throughout North America. These sculptures, created by artist Timothy Schmalz, look just like a homeless man lying under a blanket on a park bench. The only way you can tell it's Jesus is by the nail marks on the feet. There are now a number of these sculptures on display outside churches around the world. They've been met with mixed reviews. When the statue was first placed outside an Episcopal Church in Davidson, North Carolina, one local woman who saw it at dusk thought it was a real homeless person. She called the police to report the presence of a vagrant in the neighborhood. She was even more upset when she learned what the statue really was. "Jesus is not a vagrant, Jesus is not a helpless person who needs our help," she said. "We need someone who is capable of meeting our needs, not someone who is also needy."

The people in our parable today were also surprised by the thought that Jesus could be in need. Those who served others were shocked to learn they'd really been helping Jesus. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" Those who had ignored others had no idea that they were neglecting Jesus. They didn't recognize Jesus in the marginalized and vulnerable.

What do we expect Jesus to look like?

The religion of popular culture tells us that Jesus is a nice, respectable, all-powerful miracle worker who meets our own personal needs. It tells us that if we're nice and good and trust in a nice, gentle savior, then our lives will be nice and easy. But then Jesus shows up and startles us

with who he really is and what a Christian life really looks like. And, it turns out this is truly good news for us and our world. If Jesus and a life following Jesus were just about being nice and good, then the Christian life would have little to do with a world that can be so ugly and painful, so in need of healing and new life.

And, if Jesus was just about miracles to make life happy and easy, then anytime things weren't working out for us or for others we might think it was because God had abandoned us, abandoned them. Thankfully, Jesus doesn't calmly smile at our world and say, there, there now, I'll make it all better, go be nice. Instead, Jesus enters fully into all of what it means to be human, all the pain and suffering of our world.

Jesus of Nazareth was born as a vulnerable baby to poor parents who had to give him an animal's feeding trough as a bed. His first two years he lived as a refugee fleeing from the jealous, murderous King Herod. He spent his ministry as an itinerant homeless preacher who had no place to lay his head. He spent his last days beaten, tortured and killed as an enemy of the state.

God then raised Jesus from the dead to be seated in honor and glory. Even still, Jesus promises to be found in the places of brokenness where people are hungry, thirsty, naked, alone and in prison. Jesus promises to always be with and for those who are the least and the lowly in our world. Jesus is where things are the hardest. And, Jesus calls us all to be there with him as well. The Christian life is one of following Jesus into the pain and brokenness of the world and offering healing, life-giving love. Jesus has entered fully into our deep need and brokenness. This shows us that God has not abandoned us in our pain and suffering. God is present in it. God is working new life in the midst of all of it.

And that's hard. Of course, COVID makes it harder to know how to do these things Jesus calls us into, but the larger issue is that we'd so often rather avoid all the messiness of our own and other's pain. We'd rather not go there. We worry that we don't have enough time, energy, or love to really serve others and so we miss out on what truly sustains and feeds us - encounters with Jesus who is present in the needs of the world.

We, who have so much more privilege and material wealth than the least and the lowly in our world, have our own kind of poverty - a poverty of love, a poverty of Spirit that keeps us from really staying present to the needs of the world. We can and do opt out of caring, serving and working for justice.

So, thanks be to God, Jesus goes where there is poverty of any kind. Jesus is present in all the places where life is hardest, including our own hearts. We encounter Jesus not only in the needs of the world but also through word and sacrament and the body of Christ on earth. Jesus comes to us today to disturb and convict us, to forgive us, to feed and nourish us, and to send us out in service to a hurting world. Jesus comes to assure us that we have been claimed as God's beloved children. Because of Christ Jesus, we are God's people, we are the sheep of God's pasture. A place with God has been prepared for us and we have been given eternal life.

When we hear language about the eternal, we often think about what happens after we die. Yet, when Jesus talks about "eternal punishment" and "eternal life" in our parable today, that language is also about the quality of our life now, how we experience our life now. Jesus frees us from the punishing hell we experience when we live with poverty of love and Spirit, a hardness of heart, and selfishness.

Jesus gives us eternal life, a life in which we are fed by Jesus' abundant love and prepared to be people of mercy and compassion. Jesus prepares a place for us with God. With this assurance that we have a place with God, we can "go there" when things are hard rather than opting out. We can be present to the pain of this world, trusting we have a savior who is there working new life.

Beloved of God,

Through Christ Jesus you are a sheep of God's pasture, there is a place for you in God's kingdom, you are given eternal life now and always. You can follow Jesus in all things, receiving and sharing the abundance of mercy and compassion that this world so needs.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.