

Christ the Shepherd King
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 and Matthew 25:31-46
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Each year I visit the doctor for no apparent reason. That is, I make an appointment, fight the traffic to get there, sit in the waiting room, answer a bunch of questions, then get a physical examination before going on to get my blood drawn and additional routine diagnostic tests scheduled and performed. I go through all of that hassle—and it is a hassle—in order for a team of medical professionals to measure my health and wellness. It is not an entirely comfortable experience, and to be honest, I would prefer to avoid it. However, heart disease and diabetes run in my family, so it is important that I know from year to year whether my blood pressure, weight, and cholesterol and sugar levels are staying within the prescribed ranges. If something is off-kilter I know to adjust my eating or exercise or to go for more extensive testing all with the goal of maintaining my long-term health. These kinds of check-ups save people's lives, and my insurance company thinks they are such a good idea that they even foot the bill.

The church year culminates today with Christ the King Sunday. Some years the lectionary texts highlight the kingly reign of Christ, but this year's lectionary has us concluding the liturgical cycle by focusing on the king as judge. In many ways, what we get this morning from Ezekiel and Matthew is like an annual well-ness check. Their purpose is not to condemn or scare us but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, a picture of what's going on with us, often beneath the surface. On this Christ the King Sunday they remind us that in the same way that our doctor wants us to be healthy and flourish, so does our creator and King. When I go to the doctor and my numbers are off, that tells me that I need to change my habits—likely that means laying off the chocolate cheesecake Emily made for Thanksgiving. So, too, these two texts give us insight into what habits or ways of life are needed for us to live the authentic, abundant life God desires for us.

It will help to know that the Matthew passage follows three parables all with the same message: do right at all times. The faithful servant oversees his master's household with diligence while the master is away, as opposed to the wicked servant who shirks his duties and mistreats others in the household. The wise bridesmaids prepare for the bridegroom's arrival by carrying extra oil with them, whereas the foolish bridesmaids run out of oil and miss the bridegroom's arrival

when they must go out to purchase more. The servants entrusted with five and two talents act shrewdly in order to make gains for their employer, whereas the servant entrusted with one talent lets fear drive him to bury his talent in the ground, earning his master's harsh rebuke for failing to be a good steward. Throughout Matthew 24 and 25, distancing ourselves from others, allowing apathy to grow in us like a cancer, expecting that our actions have no real consequences, or relying too heavily on the good we've done in the past are all critical concerns. The image of the coming King one day separating the sheep and goats is a diagnostic tool designed to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living and help each of us measure who and where we are as we grow in Christ-likeness.

In fact, the wellness check is so important that throughout these two chapters, Matthew's negative warnings are presented in more abrasive detail than the positive affirmations he includes. Jesus is telling us through these parables that our choices make a difference. He states clearly and passionately that those who think there are no consequences to actions are mistaken. In a world that seems too big to change, our lives have more meaning and impact than we often imagine.

Thankfully, our choices are not the only or even the primary shapers of the future. They are critical, but scripture is replete with teaching that God's grace and love are powerfully at work shaping our lives and all of human history. God created the world out of an abundance of love. Like a continually bubbling fountain, God is love and overflows with love. In creation God gives generously of that loving self and in sending Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God repeatedly and extravagantly pours love out upon all people, revealing God's own self as well as showing us who we are. Created in the image of this freely giving God, we freely share, because this is what it means to be created in God's image. In particular, we love those who are most unable to give back, and we do so not to earn God's love or anyone's else's, to curry favor, or to gain recognition or reward. We give as an expression of the love that is inside of us, bubbling up, spilling over, and flowing out, all because we have been loved first.

Loving like this—loving those who least expect or deserve it, by human standards—is part and parcel of the kingdom of God. It is consistent with everything we've come to expect about God's kingdom which turns conventional wisdom on its head, and that includes the kind of king that reigns over it. Israel expected their coming king, their Messiah, to be a great warrior in the mold of King Saul and David. They expected this king to overthrow the Roman government, using power and the sword to slay Israel's enemies and liberate

Jerusalem from pagan control. Instead, Israel's king and future hope is portrayed as a lowly shepherd. This is a stunning reversal. Shepherds don't have any power. No one looks up to shepherds with admiration or respect. There is no dignity or authority ascribed to them, much less do they strike fear in the heart of the Roman military machine or inspire confidence in would-be followers. As we enter Advent, of course, the reversals will continue. A king is born in a palace, not a stable; born to royalty, not peasants; born in wealth, not poverty, to a life of privilege not sacrifice. And kings certainly don't die on crosses. Or do they?

One of the problems for us is that in our romanticizing of a shepherd's care for his sheep, we've become comfortable with a king as shepherd and shepherd as king. Don't be. Just as my comfort is not my doctor's primary or even secondary concern when I go for my annual physical, Ezekiel and Matthew aren't interested in our comfort, either. They are alerting us to the need to pay attention, to hear the truth about our shepherd king and the state of our own health.

First, they want us to hear that God is not neutral about how we live and how we treat one another. God is good and calls us to a life of goodness, or what Matthew repeatedly refers to as righteousness. From the beginning of Matthew, Jesus has been passionate about righteousness. Joseph was a righteousness man, called to go even beyond righteousness in taking Mary as his wife. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus twice blesses those who yearn for righteousness, and note that it is a righteousness that is active, not passive, that Jesus has in mind: go be reconciled with your brother or sister before you bring your gifts to the altar. Do not seek revenge on those who harm you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Second, God is no absentee deity off in some far-flung heaven self-absorbed with his own concerns and oblivious to the human plight. No action is too small for God to miss, and no action is too large to deceive him. This personal concern and investment was a 180-degree departure from the ancient understanding of the gods and how they related to men and women. Jesus said, God is here, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. God is here, particularly in your neighbor, the one who needs you. You want to see the face of God? Look in to the face of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the sick, the refugee, the children.

Third, the judgment in these scenes is based on love and helpfulness. This is, of course, where we so often get it wrong. It is easy to read these texts and miss the gospel. We can err on the side of hearing little more than a humanitarian call to

work on behalf of society's most vulnerable members. Salvation then becomes something we achieve, something we earn by being "a good person." But notice that the righteous are surprised to realize that have cared for the King of creation. Apparently, they simply shared who they were and what they had freely, without calculation or expectation. The unrighteous are also surprised, this time to discover that they missed opportunities to show love to the King. If they had known God was in their midst, they would have done the right thing. But, the King is looking for a natural overflowing of love, not calculated efforts designed to project a certain image.

Think for a moment about the simplicity of the tasks described in Matthew and the ability we have been given by God to faithfully fulfill them. Food, water, clothing, hospitality, companionship: these are the most readily available gifts to give. The lesson of the sheep and goats is good news precisely because it asks each of us to share what we already have. Whether it is food or water, a compassionate ear or an open heart, every one of us has something to share.

Jesus has already done what he is calling us to do. He fed hungry people on the hillside. He welcomed tax collectors, sinners and other strangers to meals. He offered living water to the Samaritan woman. He restored health to those who were sick. He celebrated the value of every person he met regardless of their background, their status or what they had done. When and where will the reign of God come? Jesus told us in his first public words in Matthew: "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." Judgment is happening all the time, and righteousness is happening all the time, and Jesus is with us all the time.

Our celebration of Christ the King Sunday offers a wellness check and perhaps even a warning to those living in unhealthy, self-centered ways. Similar to measuring weight or blood pressure, freely sharing with strangers, prisoners, and those who are hungry, naked or sick is a key diagnostic tool to help us assess our righteousness and health. If we cannot share freely and fully, or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus' triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued by the world, is a primary expression of our love for God and our experience of God's love for us.

We may not like warnings or annual check-ups; after all, they ask us to recalibrate our lives. However, they provide a critical wellness overview that we are wise to tend to, particularly since heart trouble plagues us all. Amen.