



## Christ the King

November 20, 2005

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Last year during the season of Lent the St. Paul Education and Witness Ministries worked together to create a series of adult forums around issues of poverty and homelessness. During one of the forums we invited Randle Loeb to speak, a man who has experienced homelessness himself and who now works as a dedicated advocate for the homeless community. During this particular forum someone confessed (it might have been me) that they did not know what to do when they met someone in the church or on the street asking for money. What they were really asking is a question most of us have probably wondered: “*Should I give them money?*” Randle’s reply was simple, yet profound: “The most important thing you can do,” he said, “is to acknowledge their humanity. Look them in the eyes. Smile and greet them.” He pointed out that the worst thing about being homeless is not lack of shelter or food or clothing. It is being disregarded, feeling invisible, and being treated as less than human.

The gospel text today describes a scene in which Jesus tells his follower, in no uncertain terms, that he expects us to take care of those in need—to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison. Yet when I hear these words in light of Randle’s admonition to acknowledge each person’s humanity, I realize that giving someone something to eat when they are hungry, clothing them when they are naked, or visiting them when they are in prison, are all simply ways of acknowledging their humanity.

Raise your hand if you ever get hungry and need food to nourish you body, if you feel lonely or isolated at times and long for someone to call or visit you, or if you ever feel exposed or vulnerable and need something with which to cover yourself. Me too. These feelings go along with being human. Ultimately, by offering food, company and covering to others, we are acknowledging that others have the same basic human needs that we have. These acts of giving are not necessarily about charity, but about recognizing other’s humanity and understanding that they have something to offer back, as well.

In addition to talking about how we are to treat one another, this text is portraying a scene of judgment in which Jesus is talking about sending some people to eternal life and others to eternal punishment. Jesus tells the accursed, “Depart from me . . .” From this we understand that eternal punishment is the state of being separated from God. Eternal life and eternal punishment, Heaven and hell, are symbols of inner realities, of states of being. All of us who have felt alienated, unloved, overwhelmed by shame or sadness, or helplessly caught in an addiction know what it’s like to be in hell. Likewise, all of us who have been welcomed home, who have seen our goodness reflected in the affirming eyes of another or who have been loved into recovery know what it’s like to be in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

I doubt there is a single person in this room who hasn’t fed someone who is hungry, dressed someone without adequate clothing, or visited a person in prison. Yet, if you are like me, there have also been plenty of times when you’ve walked or driven past a person in need of money for food, failed to find a coat for someone in need of winter clothing, or not visited someone isolated in their home, prison, or a nursing home. We cannot pass the judgment test outlined in this gospel. There is no way that we could ever do enough to earn our way to into the kingdom. So, where does that leave us? Quite simply, it leaves us in need of God, in need of forgiveness, in need of mercy, in need of grace.

Later on in the service we will profess together the words of the Apostles' Creed. We will confess our belief that after Jesus' crucifixion and death, *He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again and ascended into heaven.* Whether we believe these words literally or metaphorically, their impact is significant. The text today creates a scene in which Jesus, our king and shepherd, judges some to be worthy of eternal life and others to be deserving of eternal punishment. Yet the apostle's creed creates a continuation to this story of judgment. One in which Jesus himself, our king and shepherd, descends into hell, our place of separation from God, and brings us back to himself. Like the shepherd searching for the lost sheep, Jesus risks his own life and well-being to bring us safely home, safely back to himself. If hell is the place where we are separated from God then it would seem that hell is the one place where God cannot be. By going there anyway, Jesus refuses to accept that separation and expresses God's adamant unwillingness to leave us to our own worst selves.

This past Friday a large group of volunteers served a Thanksgiving meal that Ruth, our food services coordinator, worked to prepare over the last several weeks. In a period of 2 hours about 200 people who struggle with chronic mental illness ate a delicious meal prepared by her loving hands. In addition to those we invited from the mental health community there were others who saw the open door and wandered in from the street, who know St. Paul from Grant Ave. Street Reach meals on Mondays, or from St. Paul Local Assistance on Tuesdays and Thursdays. At about 1 o'clock a man came in who looked to be homeless. My initial impression was that he was a rough and tumble sort; He had a badly blackened eye and probably hadn't showered for a while. When he arrived he was so hungry that, when one of the volunteers asked what he would like to drink, he wasn't able to answer the question. He needed to get food in his body before he could know what he was thirsty for. After a couple of plates of food he seemed to be a different man. There was a new twinkle in his eyes and a smile on his face. When he was finished eating he came over to where Ruth was sitting and, with the utmost sincerity, offered her his compliments and thanks. It was then that I saw that he had a crucifix pinned to his shirt and understood that he, like the volunteers and workers, was trying to live in a way that reflected his faith in Christ. Before he left, with a full belly and a smile on his face, he thanked Ruth again and told her that he would pray for her. What a gift to witness this exchange of acknowledged humanity, this tiny glimpse of the Kingdom. Ruth acknowledged this man's need for delicious, healthy, filling food, as well as his need to offer thanks. This man acknowledged Ruth's need to be thanked and appreciated and all of our need, really, to be prayed for.

In the gospel today Jesus instructs us to care for one another, and to find ways to acknowledge the humanity of all our brothers and sisters. But we are only able to reach out to others because Jesus himself finds us when we are lost, reaches out to us, embraces us when we need him the most. As a response to this great love, and only as a response, are we able to reach out to others in kind.

### **Closing Prayer:**

Jesus, you have called us into your kingdom.  
You have given us your words of truth,  
given us a vision of how we are to be in the world.  
Help us to be faithful members of your kingdom.  
May others look at our lives and see that we belong to another master  
than the masters who rule the conventional world.  
And when we fail,  
judge us in love,  
deal with our weaknesses,  
not as we deserve,  
but in your mercy.  
This we pray to you,  
our king,  
our judge,  
our savior,  
our shepherd, and our friend. Amen?

<sup>1</sup> Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God. Dennis, Sheila Fabricant and Matthew Linn. pg. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Little Things Count* by William H. Willimon.