



**CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY
NOVEMBER 22, 2020
MATTHEW 15: 31-46
“THE LEAST, THE LOST, AND THE LAST”**

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

SERMON

I am tired.

How about you?

COVID fatigue on top of everything we were managing anyway.

Here in Allegheny county, pa we are being asked to close down again.



Our bishop has asked all our Lutheran congregations to stop all in-gatherings, including worship for four weeks.

To be honest, it's not like we had tons of people coming to worship.

I understand. To make the wrong decision could mean becoming ill or even dying.

In his day, Luther remarked that in the midst of life, we are in death. In his day, life expectancy was in the mid-thirties. Infant mortality was quite high.

In our day, with 250,000 of our fellow citizens dead, death is all around us. That is a brutal reality.

And this gospel can seem pretty brutal.

So, let's see if we can find a message of hope.

Muhammed Ali said, "don't count the days. Make the days count."

But, of course, we have to ask, "what does it feel like, what is the experience of making the days count?"

I'm going to start at what might seem like an odd place, but hopefully it will make sense as we move along.

I want us to think about the two halves of life.

In the first half of life, say birth to forty, we build a life.

In childhood and adolescence, we build a framework for the rest of life. Ideally, then, we develop a career or find work that is meaningful. We decide whether or not to marry and raise a family. We build friendships. We develop hobbies.

It is a time of gathering in. Our energy is largely expended for our own loved ones.

When it comes to our financial life, we are like squirrels. We store it away for the winter days as older adults.

We likely find some ways to give in the first half of life: volunteering, coaching, serving at church.

But the focus is on building a strong ego in the first half of life. We are developing our personal strengths, learning to weather the storms of life, giving the majority of our time to work and family.

And this is as it should be.



I review all this for us because in the first half of life, our energy will not be focused so much on the hungry, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned.

And let's not get too literal here. Jesus is pointing us to examples of most vulnerable among us: the least, the lost, and the last.

On this, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Christ the King Sunday, Matthew gives us one image of the last judgment.

And please take note. The judgment has nothing to do with what we believe: Matthew doesn't reference belief in the virgin birth, belief in the trinity, or whether we have accepted Jesus as our lord and savior.

He doesn't reference church attendance, whether you are straight or gay, or whether you are caught up in the "hot sins."

This image of the final judgment focuses solely on whether or not we turned our attention to the least, the lost, and the last.

Now, we always need to stay out of false guilt. And so, this is why I am speaking of the two halves of life. In human development, the first half of life cannot focus on the most vulnerable.

Again, it is a time to build the structure of our lives and strengthen the structure of the ego.

Our energy must go into building our own house. Learning to love our life. Learning to take care of ourselves. We can't give away what we don't have. So we're building a life of self-esteem and self-confidence. Hopefully, we are building a life of faith.

Only the few spend the first half of life working for the peace corps or choosing to work among vulnerable populations.

But then there is the mid-life transition.

Among the healthy shifts at the midpoint of life is the shift from gathering in to giving it away.

Here is when our focus is meant to turn toward the least, the lost, and the last.

Eric Erikson, the Neo-Freudian, developed an understanding of the eight stages of human social and psychological development.

And in the ages of 40-70, he called this time a time of generativity.

It is a time when we strive to create or nurture things that will outlast us. By contributing to positive changes that benefit other people. We do things to benefit future generations. We make our mark on the world by caring for others as well as accomplishing things that make the world a better place.



Yet one can go in the other direction, which Erickson called a time of stagnation.

This is a failure to find a way to contribute. This leads to feeling disconnected or uninvolved in your community and with society as a whole. If life stagnates, you will feel unproductive and uninvolved in the world.

So it is in the second half of life that these words of Jesus make the most sense.

Now that we have built a life, in the second half, it is time to give that life away.

Here is where many sayings of Jesus take on greater meaning.

Jesus says he came not to be served, but to serve. And so we can follow his model by also caring for the least, the lost and the last.

Paul says that Jesus emptied himself upon incarnating on earth. And we can empty ourselves in the second half of life.

Here we better understand the central notion of dying in order to live.

Having built a strong ego structure, we can begin to let go of it in order to be more fully immersed in the world of the spirit.

Hopefully, if we have been mentored in the first half of life, we can now mentor others in the second half of life.

We turn toward others.

And in turning toward the least, the lost, and the last we encounter Christ. The Christ in us meets the Christ in the most vulnerable. Christ is the given, the receiver, and the gift.

It is like a sacred loop, all within the framework of Christ.

The least, the lost, and the last are all around us.

And within us. I know I was once one of the least, the lost and the last.

I am beyond grateful for all those in my life who reached out to me and helped me find my way.

And I am so grateful to all those who help us help others at clc. We received what I consider the best possible compliment.



A woman stated that clc has stepped up in the pandemic to help people. But more than that, she remarked that we have not judged anyone, but only treated everyone with respect. She said, so often people in need are meant to feel “less than” or looked down on, but that we have treated everyone with kindness.

That is our value: compassion, respect, empathy. As it says over the door into the sanctuary: dignity and respect to all.

Before I finish, I’d like to switch my theme.

Matthew is, at times, the harshest of the four gospels. In part, because he pulls in questionable themes from the old testament.

So, we have to keep in mind that most of what Jesus has to say or what Matthew writes about is prior to Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection.

So consider the apostles’ creed. It has the statement that, between the time of being entombed and being raised from the dead, Jesus descended to the dead or he descended into hell.

What this means is that Jesus has redeemed hell and those in hell.

Now what this entails, no one knows. But it seems to imply that hell may not be the last word for anyone. Just something to think about.

SERMON SONG

With A Little Help From My Friends (The Beatles)