

The Second to Last Sunday of the Church Year (Trinity 26)
St. Matthew 25:31-46: "Jesus Gladly Serves the Least."
November 18/19, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O almighty, eternal and merciful God, by Your beloved Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, You established the kingdom of grace for us in Your holy Church here on earth, that we might believe the forgiveness of our sins, since You are a God who has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live: We beseech You, graciously forgive us all our sins; through the same, Your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 165)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.' / "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?' / "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.' / "Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' / "Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' / "Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' / "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who will come from the right hand of the Father to judge the living and the dead and bestow the crown of life on all who confess His name, dear fellow redeemed:

In the Judgment Day scene that Jesus describes, it is obvious that He is the one in charge. He is the one asking the questions; He is the one calling the shots. He will not receive the great and powerful people of the world like one dignitary or government official might receive another.

Jesus will be seated on His throne as the unquestionable Lord, the King of the universe. The angels will gather all people to Him like herdsmen gather their livestock. All will be brought before Him for judgment—the righteous to be sent to heaven and the unrighteous to hell.

Jesus will come then in a very different way than He came before. Before, He came in meekness; then He will come in power. Before, He came in humility; then He will come in glory. The difference really is striking. On the Last Day, everyone will know that Jesus is the Lord of all. But when He first arrived in the flesh, He came as the Servant of all. This was just as He planned. Jesus told His disciples that *“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve”* (Mt. 20:28).

I

But in today’s text, Jesus seems to say more about our service to Him than His service to us. He says He will put everyone at His right hand who gave Him food when He was hungry, drink when He was thirsty, a home when He was wandering, and so on. But He will put at His left hand everyone who did not give Him food or drink or home or clothing when He needed them. So which category do you fit in? Have you provided service to Jesus in these ways, or not? No doubt your response is the same as the people both at Jesus’ right hand and at His left: “Lord, when did we see You in each of these situations of need?”

Jesus’ answer is: By serving (or not serving) *“the least”* of His brothers, you served (or did not serve) Him. Who are *“the least”* that Jesus refers to? Who else could it be but the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned? *“The least”* of Jesus’ brothers is your neighbor in need. Your neighbor has all sorts of needs, some of the same ones you have, but other ones too. Some of the people you come in contact with are very wealthy, while others are poor—each station having its own challenges. Some are in good health, while others are afflicted with disease and weakness. Some have a stable home life, while others struggle to make it through each day.

God has given you special work to do. No one has exactly the same neighbors as you have. No one has exactly the same gifts, exactly the same abilities. No one is as well-positioned to help your neighbors as you. But what can you do for the poor when you haven’t got money to spare? What can you do for the mentally troubled when you don’t have the training? What can you do for the children in a turbulent home?

You can’t make every situation better and every problem go away. But you can love your neighbors by showing kindness to them and helping them, starting with the neighbors in your own home—your parents, your siblings, your spouse, your children. They are your closest neighbors, who are constantly in need of food and drink and shelter and clothing and care. Along with that, you can pray for them knowing that God always hears and answers prayer.

But you haven’t always done this, or at least haven’t done it perfectly. You have not always helped the neighbor who needed it. Sometimes you have avoided your neighbor out of anger, selfishness, fear, prejudice, or pride. Instead of treating your neighbor how you would want to be treated, you have often treated your neighbor how you think they deserve. So when Jesus returns on Judgment Day, how could you and I ever hope to be placed at His right hand?

If salvation depended on a perfect attitude and service toward our neighbors, no one would be placed at Jesus' right hand. "*None is righteous, no, not one*" (Rom. 3:10). But your salvation does not rely on your works. Jesus is not teaching that here, nor does He teach it anywhere. Salvation always and only depends on Him.

II

Jesus' humble work throughout the time of His public ministry shows how He fulfilled the law of perfect love toward neighbor for you. He considered no one below Him. Each hurting person was His neighbor, whom He was ready to help. For instance, He healed a man with a deformed hand (Mk. 3:1-5), He gave strength to an invalid who had been all but ignored for thirty-eight years (Jn. 5:2-8), He cleansed a leprous man by reaching out and touching him (Mt. 8:2-3), He cast out debilitating demons (Mk. 5:1-13, Lk. 13:10-13), He fed the hungry (Jn. 6:1-14), and He raised the dead (Mk. 5:35-43, Lk. 7:11-15, Jn. 11:38-44).

Then there was the company Jesus kept. He chose unimpressive Galileans to be in His inner circle of disciples. He spoke with people who were rejected by the cultural and religious elite. He had lunch with the hated tax collectors (Lk. 19:1-10), and He visited with prostitutes (Lk. 7:36-50). He did not join sinners in their sin, but He gladly spoke with any who would listen. He told the chief priests and elders that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would go into the kingdom of God before them, because those sinners repented and believed God's Word (Mt. 21:31-32). Jesus even helped Gentiles who came to Him (Mt. 8:5-13, Mt. 15:21-28)

This hardly scratches the surface of all the kind things Jesus did. The Apostle John wrote that if each of them were recorded, "*the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*" (Jn. 21:25). For all the different opinions expressed about Jesus, I have never heard anyone describe Him as "stuck up" or "self-centered." It is obvious that Jesus was a good person, and one who treated the people around Him with love and compassion. But if all we remembered about Jesus was that He was a worker of miracles and a nice man, we would miss the primary purpose of His coming. He did not come simply to help people with their physical and earthly needs; He came to save people for heaven.

Jesus made no distinction between the good and the bad, as if such a distinction could be made among the spiritually dead. He offered His perfect life for everyone, for every person that had ever lived or ever would live. He suffered and died for drug addicts and doctors, criminals and law enforcement officials, for the impoverished and the wealthy. He died for dictators, Communists, Socialists, Capitalists, Republicans, and Democrats. He died for Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Buddhists, and Hindus. He died for Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Greek Orthodox, and the Lutherans. All of these were His neighbors in need.

By nature, all people are spiritually lost, so Jesus, the Good Shepherd, went looking for them. He pursued them in the dark and dangerous places they had wandered. He entered the devil's lair, that wolf, who had the sheep imprisoned. Then Jesus offered up His own spotless life in their place. He took the fall for their weakness and their wandering. He paid for their transgressions. Jesus gladly gave Himself for the greatest and the least. His righteousness was sufficient for all, and His holy blood blotted out every sin.

That means He offered up Himself in *your* place. Your sins are not too much to be forgiven. No wicked deed that you have done is greater than God's grace. "[W]here sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). You are not so far below Jesus that He would overlook you. He stooped down to your level and shouldered all of your sin. He led you out of the darkness of condemnation into the light of His never-changing love. No matter how insignificant and unworthy you may feel, Jesus knows you. He eagerly sought you out to bring you into His fold, and to serve you daily through the means of grace.

The perfect love that God demands of you toward Him and your neighbor is supplied to you by Jesus. Everything is yours by faith in Him. This is why on the Last Day Jesus will look upon you at His right hand and will say to you, "*Come... inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*" The kingdom is yours because you are blessed by God the Father. He chose you for salvation, brought you to faith in Jesus through His Word, and keeps you in the faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. This faith receives every good thing you need.

Your faith is also active in bearing fruit for others. Because you are converted by God, released from the grip of sin, Satan, and death, you can freely serve "*the least*" who are around you. As you serve your neighbor, it is God whose mercy and goodness are at work through you, which is why the glory is all His.

Each of your neighbors has unique needs, but the need they all share is the need for Jesus. Like you, they need His righteous life applied to them to cover their sin, and they need His cleansing blood to wash away their guilt. They need to hear the sweet message that **Jesus Gladly Serves the Least**, because He does. He came to serve you and all sinners, and to bring you and all who cling to Him by faith into the blessed kingdom of heaven.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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