“Recognizing Christ”
Matthew 25:31–46
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *Loving Shepherd, give us your Word and open the eyes of our hearts, that we might see others with the compassion and love Jesus showed*. Amen.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year before Advent. It’s a day we celebrate Christ as the ruler of our lives and of the world.

Which raises a pretty big question: *What kind of ruler is Jesus, and what does his domain, republic, or network, if you will, actually look like?*

If you’re expecting a dark tailored suit, a boardroom, LED screens, private yachts, government jets, military parades, our Gospel reading today—the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats—offers a surprising answer. The rulers of this world socialize with the rich, the powerful, and the famous.

Jesus? Not so much. He paints a completely different picture of rulership or leadership. That brings us to three surprises in this parable worth paying attention to.

The first surprise is that Jesus invites us to recognize him in people we might otherwise overlook.

We are accustomed to looking for God in sanctuaries, music, prayer, and Scripture, and certainly, God is there.

Yet Jesus tells us God is also present where we least expect: in the person wondering where their next meal will come from, the stranger who feels unwelcome, the sick person longing for a visitor, and the person in prison, often forgotten and treated as though their life no longer matters.

Homiletics professor David Buttrick tells a story about Dorothy Day, the Catholic social worker and advocate for the poor. One day, Day spotted a man who appeared to be intoxicated, lying asleep in the street across from

her home. Before she could get to him, an Italian woman caught her arm, pointed to the man, and cried out, “Jesus Christ… my heart is broken![1]

According to Buttrick, the woman may simply have been using Jesus Christ as an exclamation—though in colorful language we obviously can't repeat in a sermon—rather than consciously making a theological statement. But something about her reaction was deeply moving. Her heart was broken by the sight of a man lying helpless in the street. And she could not simply walk away. That is Jesus’ exact point. Someone doesn't have to look religious, act holy, or sit in our pews for us to meet Christ in them.

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It’s easy to love humanity in general, yet hard to love the person right in front of us. As Charlie Brown says in *Peanuts*, “I love humanity; it’s people I can’t stand.” We care about poverty in theory, yet lose patience with someone asking for help. We speak of welcome, yet sometimes struggle to make room for someone unfamiliar. We pray for the sick, yet sometimes miss opportunities to reach out.

Jesus brings us right back to the person in front of us. The real question isn't just whether we *believe* in Christ—it's whether we *recognize* him in the faces we meet every single day.

The second surprise is that neither the sheep nor the goats have a clue what they’ve done—or failed to do. Both groups are caught completely off guard! Both groups are caught completely off guard.

The sheep ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?” They aren’t being modest—they genuinely don't remember. They weren't keeping score or trying to earn God's favor; they simply saw people in need and helped.

The goats ask the exact same question: “Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty…” They never realized that in overlooking someone in need, they were also overlooking Christ. Neither group recognized the King in the faces right in front of them.

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[1]David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2000), 128.

New Testament scholar Greg Carey points out that this element of surprise is crucial. We often read this passage as a simple lesson about doing good things: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and you will be rewarded.[2] Of course, these actions matter; Jesus is very clear about that.

But if we reduce the parable to a checklist of good deeds, we miss something deeper. For the sheep, kindness wasn't a strategy; it was a reflex. It was simply their way of life.

It reminds me of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells his disciples, *"You are the salt of the earth,"* and *"You are the light of the world."*

Notice he doesn't say, *"Try really hard to become salt,"* or *"Hustle a little more so you can be light."* He says, *"You are."* It's an identity, not a to-do list. The sheep's compassion wasn't forced—it was just the natural fruit of a life planted in God's love.

And that leads directly to the third surprise: this parable isn't about earning God's love through good works; it is about letting God's love reshape the way we live.

Hearing this can make us anxious. We start wondering, *"Does my salvation depend on piling up enough good deeds? Have I fed enough people or welcomed enough strangers to land on the right side of judgment?"*

That's not what Jesus is teaching. Faith isn't a transaction where we buy God's grace with good behavior. Still, grace never leaves us unchanged: the love we receive from God naturally spills out into the love we give to others.

I came across a wonderful story in a 2017 edition of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, written by Todd Van Beck, a funeral director who had heard it circulating in his profession for years.

Early in his career in Omaha, Nebraska, Todd worked with a veteran funeral director named Cornelius Patrick Heafey. Mr. Heafey had been in the funeral business for more than fifty years, and throughout that time, he

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[2] Greg Carey, Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46, *Working Preacher*, November 23, 2014, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christ-the-king/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46-7

carried around a mysterious little black book, constantly jotting down notes. Naturally, the staff had their theories about what was in it. Some thought it was full of horse-racing bets; others suspected it was a secret list of old girlfriends!

Eventually, Mr. Heafey passed away. His funeral was packed; flowers filled the room, and even the governor attended. During the service, his widow came forward holding that famous little black book. She opened it and read the first entry, dated April 17, 1920: “Mary Flannery; she is alone.” The next entry read: “Frieda M. Gale; she is all alone.”

Then she explained the secret behind the book. Whenever her husband met someone at a funeral with no family left, he wrote down their name. Every Christmas Eve, he would call everyone on that list and invite them to his home for Christmas dinner. He had been doing this for fifty years.[3]

Think about that. For fifty Christmases, he quietly remembered people who would have been alone. He wasn't seeking applause; he simply noticed the lonely and pulled up another chair at his table. Compassion had become his way of life.

Jesus calls us not just to hear his words, but to live them out. Good trees, Jesus explains, bear good fruit (Matt. 7:17-18). And when we are rooted in God’s grace, we start bearing that fruit, too. Not perfectly—we all still have our blind spots, our fears, and our off days—but little by little, God’s love takes root in us.

Jesus may no longer be walking the dusty roads of Galilee, yet the Risen Christ is still walking right through our neighborhoods.

As we bring this church year to a close and anticipate Advent—the coming of Christ—we might wonder where to look to meet him.

The grace of this parable is that we don't have to guess. We already know where. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

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[3] Todd W. Van Beck, “The Little Black Book,” A Book of Christmas Miracles: 101 Stories of Hope and Happiness, in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Amy Newark, ed. (2017), 180-191.