

IT'S ONLY A STORY... (PART 3)
 HOW WE SEE IS WHAT WE SEE

Destitute king, one with the hungry, the naked and the scorned: may our faith be proved not in dogma and piety but in serving you in the last and the least; through Jesus Christ, the stranger's Lord.

A Collect for Proper 29A, Prayers for An Inclusive Church

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
 CHRIST THE KING/THE REIGN OF CHRIST
 Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46
 NOVEMBER 26, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY
 EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 25:31-46

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that 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 something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me 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 nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just 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."

How do you feel about surprises?

Some people love them – like surprise parties, going to them, arranging them, maybe even being

the focus on one.... (Personally, not so much....)

But this parable Jesus tells is full of surprises. Both of the groups were surprised – those who fed the

hungry, welcomed the stranger, visited the imprisoned AND the group that did none of those things. Neither group thought deeply about what they did... so they were surprised by the report of the Son of Man – you did or did not do it to me.

That's a *real* surprise – not a concocted one.

The entire phenomenon of Jesus Christ is a scandal of the full identification of God with humanity and creation. The reality of God's actual presence continually disrupts conventional human notions and projections about the divine and sacred.

God persists in being here in you, in me, in neighbors we like and in neighbors we wish we were nothing like, in people we find abhorrent, in all that we overlook, in the creation that is not scenery or backdrop for our dramas, but is fully alive revealing and expressing the totality of God.

In his new book *Just This*, Fr. Richard Rohr writes: "The way to any universal idea is to proceed through a concrete encounter. There are a number of ways to say the same thing: the one is the way to the many, the specific is the way to the spacious, the now is the way to the always, the here is the way to the everywhere, the material is the way to the spiritual, the visible is the way to the invisible. When we

see contemplatively, we know that we live in a fully *sacramental* universe, where everything is a pointer and an epiphany."

He notes Hebrew scripture scholar Walter Brueggeman calls this phenomenon "the scandal of the particular" and sees it as the whole pattern of the Bible. He also points out that most people don't transcend from the particular, but get stuck arguing about all the particulars. So where a hand is pointing at the moon, we discuss the hand, but don't get around to being in awe of the moon.

Fr. Richard boils all this down to say: "*how* we see is *what* we see." Reality is mediated by our own inner nature and our projections, our inclinations to see or not see, to allow "what is" to come to us as it is.

We are used to hearing about sacraments in church and we may even recall the old definition: "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." So bread and wine in the Eucharist or water in baptism, allowing us to experience the grace of God feeding us or affirming a bond of relationship with us.

But can we get from the practice field of church to the real world and discover the real presence of Christ in those around

us, even (or especially) in those we typically overlook or despise?

Some sort of contemplative practice, being able to pray regularly for 10 or 20 minutes a day in silence or a guided silence, allows us to become aware of what is going on inside of us and awakens us to God all around us.

Fr. Richard writes about the “*unconscious reservoir of expectations, assumptions, and beliefs we are already immersed in*” blocking our vision.

He writes: “If we do not see what is in our reservoir, we will understand all new things in the same old patterned way—and nothing new will ever happen. A new idea held by the old self is never a really new idea, whereas even an old idea held by a new self will soon become fresh and refreshing. Contemplation actually fills our reservoir with clear, clean water that allows us to encounter experience free of old patterns.”

Today we reach the end of the season after Pentecost; next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent and a new church year.

As in the previous two weeks, this big parable concludes with harsh judgment, one group sent off to eternal punishment and one group to eternal life. These particulars in a story – only a story (again) – have gotten people hung up for centuries about the nature of

God, the nature of eternal life, whether there’s a spatial heaven or hell... and so on.

The point is, “how we see is what we see.”

God’s undying love doesn’t change but we humans are fickle as hell.

This story Jesus is telling is trying to wake us up.

Again.

There is no us and them.

And note what a surprise for both groups in the parable to hear that their actions mattered. It mattered for those served or not, it mattered for those doing the serving or not. Because all are one group in God’s view.

In the baptismal covenant we continually promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor” as ourselves and to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

These can be mere ideologies until we get to the heart of who we are and who the people are around us. God in all.

The same goes for our programs and events and plans – they can be mere busy work or a face to face encounter with the living God.

Recall what Fr. Richard Rohr writes about the whole engagement of the life of faith or

the spiritual life – both as individuals and as a faith community. He writes: “In the end, however, the object and goal of all spirituality is finally the same for all [people]: union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world.”

When it comes to God in us and God in all those around us and as we move from this year to the next, may we also move from surprise to *expectation*, aware, awake to the reality that our actions matter, whether large or miniscule, expressing generous service. All, literally all, is God, is the Divine Reality, is the Sacred Presence.



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www.smitv.org