

November 26, 2017 Reign of Christ Sunday

Ezekiel 24:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Matthew 25:31-46

Star Tribune, Dec. 21, 2003, Kate Stanley about Lowell Boswell. ISAIAH Claiming Our Voices house meeting facilitation.

Grace and peace, to you beloved of Christ, from our God of mercy and justice. Amen.

I have a picture in my office that gets a little attention: Sometimes people wonder if it's Jesus.

I suppose, depending on your tradition, and sense of skin tone, it could be Jesus.

Throw in the context that this picture has a primary place in your pastor's office, has for more than a dozen years, packed and unpacked, always getting a spot—and Jesus isn't a bad guess.

But “When did we see you?” That's the question for today. Tell us: when did we see you?

It's the question asked by those folks deemed goats, herded to the left, accused for what they didn't do.

When did we see you?

And that's the very same question of those curiously unaware, those called sheep, blessed, ready to inherit the kingdom. When did we see you?

When did we see you hungry or thirsty? When did we see you naked or imprisoned?

When did we see you sick or a stranger? When did we see you?

And the king replies, “Truly, truly, when you did it to the least of these, my beloved, members of my family, you did it to me.”

The gospel this morning is cutting in its truth. Radical in its call.

If I think about Matthew 25 very much at all, it makes me uncomfortable.

I meet a lot of people, a fair number asking for help, many in need.

How can I tell which needs are real? Am I just enabling?

“When you did it to one of the least of these, members of my family, my beloved, you did it to me.”

Jesus doesn't say anything about being officially hungry or legally documented or “truly deserving”.

Instead the only criteria Jesus names is this: the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the small ones.

Our calling, our primary calling, is to look into another human being's face and to see the face of Jesus.

Like I said, cutting in its truth. Radical in its call.

We name today Reign of Christ Sunday, or more traditionally Christ the King Sunday.

Some festivals in the church date back nearly to Jesus himself, but this Sunday, by comparison, is young.

It was 1925, in Benito Mussolini's Italy, when Pope Pius the 11th instituted the feast of Christ the King.

Consider those days: 1925, between the wars, Fascism is at a height with Mussolini's rule.

And the Pope creates this new feast day that we celebrate still.

A festival to remind us that our allegiance is to Christ, to a spiritual ruler, not an earthly one.

A festival to invite us into a reign, a way, a culture, if you will, not defined primarily by wealth or a mighty hand, violence or supremacy, not defined by the world's power, but defined by Christ's humble reign.

Reign of Christ is the last Sunday of the church year, for next week we begin again with Advent.

It is new year's eve and as we sing through the seasons gone by, I am prone to reflection.

Every year it seems, I turn back to see what I preached last year at this time.

It turns out, last year Reign of Christ fell just 12 days after the presidential election.

Remember that time?

So much emotion on all sides, and real fear for those in immigrant communities and in Muslim communities.

The year before, in 2015, Reign of Christ, fell in the midst of demonstrations in Minneapolis' 4th precinct along Plymouth Avenue, just 7 days after the shooting of Jamar Clark.

As this church year completes its cycle I'm still shaken by news of the tremendous killing and injuries at the crowded Sufi mosque in Egypt as the community gathered for Friday prayers.

I'm moved by the brave witness of those who have experienced sexual harassment, and our growing willingness to talk together more honestly about authority and power and gender and responsibility.

Why am I rehearsing the news of late November?

Because it reminds us again that this year, like last year, and the one before, our God comes not as a power-hungry ruler, trampling down the poor.

Indeed, Christ comes as one of the vulnerable, the lowly, as a babe born to refugees, an outcast come to turn the world upside down, a servant king whose leadership is a new brand so needed, so rare, so powerful, so gentle, so strong..

Last Sunday we hosted a house meeting at our place on the northside—the conversation was rich.

More meetings are scheduled for this week and still more can be added to the calendar.

These meetings and a thousand others around the state are part of the work of ISAIAH faith-based community organizing.

They are aimed to engage 6,000 of us, leading up to the caucus meetings in February and the elections next fall.

Too often, the narrative wants us to believe there isn't enough, that some are deserving and others not so much, that our problems are rooted in bad choices not in human system, in broken systems.

Oh, the temptation is great.

But the call of our faith reminds us of the truth: we're linked together part of the same body, and these broken systems are created by humans and can be redesigned by humans.

In the house meeting the first question was hardest: about sharing a story of how we've been hurt by these systems of oppression, identifying the pain, really, how we—or, I—have skin in the game.

It's the crucial question, and it's the one that those of us with some privilege can avoid so as to keep us at arms length, never fully feeling the pain.

But then I think about my kids and our transracial family, or about my neighbors, or about sanctuary, and I'm reminded again that even with all this privilege my skin is in the game, we're all in.

It's the only way we can avoid reinforcing the power dynamics by saying: this is your issue, not my issue.

Truth is, we went around the room and we all know the pain, we all can feel it, we all know something of being vulnerable, so these issues are our issues...and this changes everything.

Instead of saying I'll just get involved because I'm trying to help you, to save you,

Actually, **me too**, I'm involved because I can see Christ in you, and you can see Christ in me.

And this is part of bringing about Christ's reign—and it's radical, and often uncomfortable.

Matthew's story of the least of these always reminds me of Fritz Eichenberg's well-used engraving, The Christ of the Breadlines, with Jesus himself standing with the least of these, waiting for food.

Eichenberg's engravings were used by Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement.

Jesus stands in the breadline, in the long cue for mental health care, in the families praying to stay together, at the eternal night at the bedside, in the lonely prison cell, and so do we, for we are called to be all in.

Dear ones, we bring ourselves—power, privilege, social location, weakness, need, skin—we bring it all, for my salvation, my healing, is wrapped up with your salvation, your healing, your wholeness.

"When you did it to one of the least of these, members of my family, my beloved, you did it to me."

This gospel could be used to judge us, goats to this side, sheep to the other, but that's not our task.

This gospel could be used to guilt us into work's righteousness, but guilt is not the point.

Rather, this gospel reminds us again that our God is no ordinary King, she is no ruler in the worldly sense.

Our God, our Christ, is the shepherd of our yearning, the lover of our souls, the hope of our tomorrows.

And because of this great love, we are compelled to open our eyes and to see Christ in the tears and laughter, in the great hope and in the desperate need, in the nearly lost. **In you, in me.**

Now about that picture I mentioned. I guess you could say it is Jesus, if that's who you see in it.

It is actually a sketch of Lowell Boswell—well spoken, well read, dignified.

A Marine, a member of the White Earth tribe, the 12th of 13 children.

Once Lowell returned from Vietnam in 1974, he spent nearly every night until his heart attack and death outside, under the bridges, by the river, feeling the wind—29 years.

I knew him years ago and eventually led his memorial service.

This picture was the one the Star Tribune artist created for the spread in the Opinion Page in 2003 when Kate Stanley, one of the editorial staff, befriended him and later wrote about his life and death.

His prison mug shot was the only picture anyone could find, so the artist got creative.

That piece made a lot of people uncomfortable—I guess there's a theme here today.

The irony is those who see Jesus in this picture have seen something quite true: it is Jesus, but not like you thought.

In this season and every season, when we start seeing the face of Jesus, in Lowell, and in the least of these, and in each other, the Reign of Christ will come, it will come. Amen.