

Thanksgiving Weekend–Nov 26, 2023
Teaching Title: "**Seeing the One**"
Teacher: Melissa Logsdon

Introduction: The Reign of Christ Sunday

While preparing for this teaching, I learned that this Sunday is a special day in the church calendar: It is referred to as "Christ the King Sunday" or "Reign of Christ Sunday". Today marks the end of the long season of what is called "ordinary time" in the church calendar. It is a time to pause for reflection—to assess how we have lived this year.

So today, we take time to pause before we begin the new year. For next Sunday, we commence the new church year with the beginning of the advent season—a season marked with joyous gratitude for what Jesus started by coming to [rescue us and of looking forward and longing for Jesus' coming reign, where we will experience God's kingdom realm in all its fullness.

This past week, we have paused to give thanks for all of God's goodness in our lives.

Today, we are invited to pause to assess the extent we are bringing God's goodness into others' lives.

One of the passages listed in the Revised Lectionary for today is in Matthew 25. This passage has been taught with the focus of judgment, especially on those people and nations that have NOT seen the needs of the people as holy—those that have ignored and abused God's people. And while that perspective is one valid reading of this passage, I want to take a look at it from a slightly different perspective in order to provide us with a moment of self reflection and to highlight hidden within this expectation to care for others, there is this beautiful mystery that we are at the same time doing these things directly to Jesus.

Point 1: Judgment for Justice

In Matthew 25:

"When the Son of Man appears in his majestic glory, with all his angels by his side, he will take his seat on his throne of splendor, and all the nations will be gathered together before him. And like a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats, he will separate all the people. The 'sheep' he will put on his right side and the 'goats' on his left."

Matthew 25:31-33 TPT

Yes, there is a judgment that will take place. Jesus will judge the nations.

The passage continues with Jesus explaining,

"Then the King will turn to those on his right and say, 'You have a special place in my Father's heart. Come and experience the full inheritance of the kingdom realm that has been destined for you from before the foundation of the world! For when you saw me hungry, you fed me. When you found me thirsty, you gave me drink. When I had no place to stay, you invited me in, and when I was poorly clothed, you covered me. When I was sick, you tenderly cared for me, and when I was in prison you visited me.'

"Then the godly will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty and give you food and something to drink? When did we see you with no place to stay and invite you in? When did we see you poorly clothed and cover you? When did we see you sick and tenderly care for you, or in prison and visit you?'

"And the King will answer them, 'Don't you know? When you cared for one of the least of these, my little ones, my true brothers and sisters, you demonstrated love for me.'"

Matthew 25:34-40 TPT

Jesus will judge the nations on whether we have done Justice to others. Have the nations (have we) cared for the poor, the sick, the immigrant, the prisoner?

Jesus goes on to declare:

"Then to those on his left the King will say, 'Leave me! For you are under the curse of eternal fire that has been destined for the devil and all his demons. For when you saw me hungry, you gave me no food, and when you saw me thirsty, you gave me no drink. I had no place to stay, and you refused to take me in as your guest. When you saw me poorly clothed, you closed your hearts and did not clothe me. When you saw that I was sick, you didn't lift a finger to help me, and when I was imprisoned, you never came to visit me.'

"And then those on his left will say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty and not give you food and something to drink? When did we see you homeless, or poorly clothed? When did we see you sick and not help you, or in prison and not visit you?'

"Then he will answer them, 'Don't you know? When you refused to help one of the least important among these my little ones, my true brothers and sisters, you refused to help and honor me.' And they will depart from his presence into eternal punishment. But the godly and beloved 'sheep' will enter into eternal bliss."

Matthew 25:41-46 TPT

We may come away from a passage like this with a myriad of responses: excitement on coming judgment of good people and bad of holy nations and immoral ones; overwhelm on how to meet the needs of the masses; and maybe inspiration?

Somehow, in the mystery of this invitation and expectation to care for others' needs, to see their needs as holy, we get this idea that our actions are not just holy acts as representatives of God, but also holy acts TO God.

Point 2: Seeing "The One"

God models to us the care we are to have for others. In Exodus 3:7, it is God who says, *"I have indeed seen the misery of my people...and heard them crying out...I am deeply concerned about their suffering."*

Are we "deeply concerned" about the suffering of others? I believe we are! To paraphrase Paul in Ephesians 1: "I know of your good works, and I thank God for them!" Individually and collectively we often do the work God has called us into. We do care for the needs of others, we seek to bring justice into our communities.

But sometimes, we miss the mark. Sometimes, whether through weariness, busy-ness, or because we too are being used and abused, we just can't seem to "get with the program" so to speak. We love the idea, but we just don't feel like we have the resources or power to make a difference. If you find yourself able to ever relate to these feelings, this next point is for you (and for me): The call to seeing "the one".

A few years ago, I had the privilege of going to West Africa to encourage fellow believers. We traveled to many remote villages. I had come out of a season where I was busy ministering to the hundreds and on this trip God highlighted the holiness of ministering to the one. Over and over again, I was prompted to see and respond to the need of one person. I felt prompted that when feeling overwhelmed by the lack of resources, the lack of justice in that region, instead of being overwhelmed to the point of inaction, I could focus on making a difference in one life.

One example of this was on a Sunday morning at a church service. The church building was a structure of a few tree trunks as poles and some palm leaves thatched together for a roof. The floor was nature's dirt. It was open sided, so it was rather a shelter than a building. This allowed us to see the neighbors in the village and them to see us.

As the service commenced, I was drawn to notice a woman sweeping her dirt yard. As the service continued, she continued to sweep closer and closer to the gathering, in an effort to hear our service. I finally pointed her out and got a translator to have a church member go over and invite her to the service. She quickly got ready and came over to the service. What happened next is just heartbreakingly beautiful: at the conclusion of the service this woman shared about her life. Her husband had another family, so she was not being cared for well. Her needs were not being met and she was being abused. She risked being vulnerable to share her needs, the church gathered together and prayed over her AND made plans to care for her needs and help her.

Because God cares for us individually, we too, get invited in to care for the individual life before us. So, if you are feeling overwhelmed just remember: we don't have to change the whole world today, just somebody's day.

Point 3: Ignoring "The One"

I don't know if this ever happens to you, but sometimes, I DON'T see the one in front of me. I'm too busy, rushing from point A to point B. I have my head down in my own world. I walk right past the one in need...and don't even realize it.

Then there are other times when I DO see the one in front of me—hurting from all the woes of this life, and I do nothing. I may even look them in the eye, but walk right by. The woman having a bad day in the checkout lane. The sick and sad person at the doctor's office. The attendant at the gas station: underpaid, overworked, and feeling unseen.

When I don't act, I usually, and sometimes immediately, feel convicted (Thank you, Holy Spirit). Sometimes the conviction leads me to go back and seek out the one I saw. But other times, I just make excuses: I'm running late, I may not be safe, I'm having a bad day too, what do I have to offer them; I don't have money, I don't have time, I don't have wisdom...the list continues. And sometimes the litany of excuses appeases my conscience enough to move on, but if I'm honest with myself and with you...these are the ones that keep me up at night, that nag at me, that I carry with me...that hopefully, help me be more willing to respond the next time.

I've watched many people going about in the rain with their arms laden with shopping bags, etc. And I have driven by so many. And regretted it. One Sunday morning, on my way to church, to pastor, I saw a lady. In the rain. Arms full of bags. I drove right past her, hoping someone who wasn't in a hurry, who didn't have somewhere important to be on time, would help her. Then that familiar nudge pierced my heart. I immediately thought of the parable of the good samaritan and the religious leaders that had their own set of excuses to not help the one on the side of the road. I realized the masses that I was about to minister to would just need to wait while I ministered to the one in need right in my path.

I'm not going to lie, even as I turned around, I was worried more about my responsibilities going undone while I sought out this one woman. But I went ahead and turned around and went back for her. I did find her and got her out of the pouring rain, and gave her a ride. I don't know if I said anything really "spiritual", and I don't know if it made a lasting impact on her life, but for me, that moment is one of those moments that has stuck with me.

When I went back to my "important ministry work", I was late for church. But you know what? Other leaders had cared for the needs that morning till I got there. I don't remember anything else from that morning...the rest of the Sunday morning was rather forgettable. I hope whoever else I ministered to that day was also blessed. But all these years later, I just remember this one. This one that I went back for. This one that matters to Jesus. This one that I was Jesus to. This one that somehow as I served I was serving Jesus. And I am forever changed by that obedient encounter.

Conclusion: Harvest & Eyes Lock

This fall, as I was walking a dirt lane, admiring the gorgeous fall day and the the beauty of the freshly harvested fields, I noticed some beans on the ground. As I walked along, I noticed even more. Soybeans that had missed the collection or fallen out upon transfer. To the farmer, the harvest looked complete. But to me, I took a minute and started to pick up one bean at a time, and count them. Within minutes, I had over a hundred beans in my hand! I wondered how many more still remained along the roadside? In that moment, God reminded me of “seeing the one”. We may think that everyone in our sphere of influence knows they are seen, have heard that God loves them, and already have what they need in their lives. But, I think there is an invitation to see “the one” in front of you with new eyes. And to consider how you can bring God’s love into their lives. You might be surprised to find, as I did, how many people are right there in front of you!