

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King – November 26, 2023**

*Matthew 25:31-46*

Oops. That was the subject line of an email from a friend who publishes a small, local newspaper. The word oops, of course, immediately made me want to read what she had to say. What did she mess up? She said an editor from the newspaper, USA Today, was an old friend and looking for stories for the fifth-year commemoration of the Tree of Life attack. Specifically, she was looking for stories of Jews and Muslims working together... not in official religious dialogues but regular Pittsburghers engaging one another at a human level, as people.

Was there anything in Pittsburgh or beyond my friend knew about? She couldn't think of anything. You just don't hear stories of people acting like neighbors much anymore. The news is filled with wars and economic or climate crises or health scares. That is dehumanizing.

A week or so later, USA Today published a story about Faith Night of ice skating that occurred yesterday evening. Muslims, Jews, and Christians gathered down the street to enjoy being together as friends and neighbors. There was no political agenda. We had pizzas that everyone could eat. Generic holiday music was in the background. The Imam and I skated together for half an hour talking about normal life concerns. It turns out that mosques, synagogues, and churches have a lot in common at the human level.

When my publisher friend read the newspaper article, she immediately wrote and said, "Oops." She said she had been to Faith Night every year. It has just become *remarkable* how *unremarkable* it is that we mostly get along here. Remarkable how unremarkable it is.

Ice skating is not going to change the world. Many small acts of faith in action that recognize people as humans created in the image of God... *will* change the world. God's plan to usher in the Kingdom, a vision for a restored creation, is- by definition- humanizing and deifying at every level. That is what our feast today, Christ the King, and the Gospel are about. It is the last Sunday of the Church year, pointing towards a future consummation, before we start the season of Advent next week.

Christ the King became a feast in the year 1925. The Pope (Pius XI) instituted the feast to counter growing secularism and against the backdrop of the horrors of First World War and Spanish Flu pandemic. The Spanish Flu and COVID share some similarities in the dispersion and disruption and the fear and pain they caused people. We needed a reminder that God had a plan for redemption. The Kingdom of Heaven is coming. We offer our part to help enact Heaven come to Earth as ambassadors of this hope.

This Gospel story, for the feast, is the last thing Jesus teaches before the Passion, his journey to death on the Cross at Calvary. Jesus had told the disciples about difficult days ahead... people would lose faith. This is his farewell discourse or swan song... what he wants us to remember.

There are three parables in a row that make up these final sayings. They all are mutually reinforcing and all about the Kingdom of Heaven. The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, we heard two weeks ago, is about being prepared to welcome Jesus. Last week was the Parable of the Rich Landowner and Talents. Don't bury your gifts, a lot or a little, but use whatever you have to do good, to enact the Kingdom, in whatever way you can.

This story sums up all of Jesus's teaching in a memorable way and brings the last two parables together. Jesus is portrayed as the King who comes to judge Creation. No one likes to be judged but remember this is about hope. You *want* the judge to be merciful, forgiving, loving and on your side, not impartial. That's precisely what we get. The Kingdom is God's will being done on Earth as it is in Heaven. This parable is about what that looks like for us, our role in it.

The story is set up as one of contrasts. It makes it easier to remember. This was passed down orally and not written down for many years. People who offer acts that build the Kingdom are sheep. People who do not build up the Kingdom are goats. Incidentally, sheep and goats were equally valued in that agricultural society. It's not *who* they are but *what* they do that matters.

The sheep were put on the right hand, meaning the place of honor, while the goats were put on the left. This story is not about who we are or what we believe even but what we do. It does not matter, in this sense, if you are Christian, Jew, Muslim or how you identify. Actions are the only thing that distinguishes between a sheep and a goat in the story. It is putting faith in action.

Living in and enacting the Kingdom is ministering to those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison... or on the street or at work or school every day. These are representative categories of those in need. How we treat others, particularly those with a lower status or different from us or those we count as enemies, is how we treat Jesus. The Kingdom, God's Heaven on Earth, is embodied and shared in these small acts that constitute a life.

You might naturally think, now I have to worry about being judged a sheep or goat and have even more stuff to do? There is already enough to worry about. That further dehumanizes us and is not the point. It is to be mindful of the little things that make up the big things in life. We become more human and more like God by putting our faith in action that shapes us over time.

You are already doing it. You come to church and learn more about your faith to practice out in the world. You support the church financially and donated to the Bazaar. You bought toys for Christmas for those who had none with the Berry Project. Recycled plastic and food donations increased during the pandemic. You spoke out for justice. You gave someone hope who had none. It is remarkable how unremarkable those are but that is the nature of our faith.

Let me point out some more in which you are leading the way at Calvary under the framework of being remarkable how unremarkable or normal that is here. We have a weekly class led by a priest and rabbi learning the Bible together. We formed a center for interfaith collaboration. A parishioner made Stars of David to go along with our pocket crosses. Children made ribbons to stand in solidarity with children of the middle east. The president of the synagogue and his wife are listed in our parish directory with other members. Muslims, Jews, and Christians spent time together as friends and neighbors in the most ordinary way possible. In a few weeks, we will have a Christmas pageant in which we tell the story of the birth of Jesus as the Messiah and will have a rabbi play Moses and another rabbi play a wise man. Then we will share a Hannukah party together. Think about how humanizing that is for a moment. The stranger has become friend. All that is absurd but normal here. It is remarkable how unremarkable that all is.

All that seems to be how God works, at least according to the Bible. In the face of the overwhelming dehumanizing forces that come from the world, God intercedes and says no more. That's the plan we glimpse on this feast, through this Gospel, and through Advent.

An unmarried teenage, peasant girl from nowhere special received a vision that she will become pregnant and bear a son from God. He will be called Emmanuel which means God with us, the most humanizing and deifying event in history. She came from a people who were insignificant in the ways of the world and not particularly good and often were more fearful than faithful. The baby was born in a stable and became a refugee who grew up among working class people. He left no writings, no monuments, and died a criminal according to the empire. That is how God entered the world, in the most ordinary way possible, to bring grace and dignity to human beings and lift them up to God. It is remarkable how unremarkable that is. But that's how God works through Jesus and through me and you... one small, act at a time.