



The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King
The Rev. Jonathan Stepp
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

A man was down on his luck, and even though he only had one set of old, ratty clothes to wear, he decided to go to church at the big, downtown Episcopal Church. When he walked in the door an usher met and, looking down his nose, said “what can I do for you?” He said he’d come to worship and the usher reluctantly pointed to a seat on the very back pew, away from others.

As the man was leaving after worship the usher told him, “you need to talk to God this week about the right way to dress and present yourself for worship when you come to this church.”

The next Sunday the man was back again and dressed just as terribly as before. The usher saw him again and asked, “did you talk to God about how you should present yourself here?” And the man replied, “yeah, we talked, God said he didn’t know since he’d never been here.”

These words are akin to what we hear in today’s gospel story, as Jesus confronts people with the truth that they have not known him or understood the purpose of his life and ministry.

This Sunday’s parable is one of the most famous in the Gospel of Matthew – the story of the sheep and the goats. It creates a powerful image, doesn’t it? A day of judgment. Christ the King seated on his throne with the nations gathered before him. And, of course, the prospect of being called to account for how we have spent our time and how we have lived our lives.

There is a lot that we could focus on here, but I want to zero in on a particular aspect of Jesus’ teaching that I find fascinating: the hiddenness of God’s work in the world. The hiddenness of God’s work in the world is a major theme of this parable because both the sheep the goats receive an unexpected revelation. They discover that Christ has been present, but hidden from their view, at every moment of their lives, from the first day until the last. Everyone gathered before the throne of Christ asks the same question: “Lord, when was it

that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?” And the answer is: “you didn’t see Christ. He was hidden from your view.”

This striking question highlights a tension that the Bible confronts us with. The Bible is filled with stories of God showing up in a visible and exciting way: from the burning bush before Moses, to Jesus raising the dead, to the miracles performed by the Apostles in the book of Acts, we are flooded with stories of God at work in the world in a visible and exciting way. The tension arises when we compare our own lives to the Bible stories – in our own lives, most of the time, God is far less visible and our connection with God is far less exciting.

If we read the Bible in the wrong way then we risk doing ourselves a disservice. If we read the stories of God showing up visibly and with excitement as a description of God’s normal way of working, then we will make the mistake of thinking that God is not around unless we see something exciting happening. I believe the better way to read the Bible is to recognize that these many stories of God revealing himself in an exciting way are actually the exception to the rule. These stories were preserved, handed down, and written into holy scripture, precisely because they were so unusual, so unexpected, and – in a sense – so out of character for God.

In today’s parable, and many other places, Jesus tells us as much. Even as he himself is a visible and often exciting revelation of God, Jesus warns us not to think that his ministry is God’s normal way of working. He tells us plainly: God’s normal way of working is quietly, hidden away behind the scenes, and in the places we least expect to find him.

But Jesus also tells us that God’s work will not remain hidden forever. In fact, this is the original meaning of the word “apocalypse.” Today we use that word to refer to the end of the world, and especially movies and books about the end of the world as we know it. “Apocalyptic” we call them. And parables such as the one we read today are apocalyptic parables – they’re about the end of the world as we know it but they are also apocalyptic in the original sense of the word: the original meaning of the word “apocalypse” was something more akin to an “unveiling.”

In Greek, an apocalypse was when the curtain was drawn back and something hidden was revealed. These parables are apocalyptic because they are about that moment when the curtain is pulled back and we discover that God was present, in and through Christ, the whole time – but we did not see him at work.

So, God's work in the world is largely hidden from us but God will not remain forever hidden. Eventually God's work will be revealed and our role in God's work will also be revealed. The question, then, is how should we live our lives in light of this reality?

The temptation is to try to discover God. If God is concealed and his work is hidden, then perhaps we ought to pay closer attention and try to discover God. Jesus tells us that is futile. The sheep in the parable are not commended for having figured out where God was and what God was doing because such a task is impossible. Yes, we may get hints from time to time, and there will certainly be a few dramatic moments in our lives when God shows up in a clear and exciting way, but those times will only come when God wants them to come. Whenever the almighty creator of all things chooses to remain hidden we may rest assured that he will remain hidden for as long as he chooses.

The key is not for us to find God. God has already found us in Christ and God will draw back the curtain and reveal his work when the time is right. Our calling is not to unveil God, our calling is to believe what Jesus tells us about God's heart and to live our lives accordingly.

Why do the sheep in the parable feed the hungry, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, and visit prisoners? It's not because they had an inside track on where God was at work, it's because they knew God's heart and they opened themselves to have their hearts transformed to be more like God. They didn't know exactly where Jesus was, but they knew exactly who Jesus is. They knew exactly who it is that Jesus cares about – the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the imprisoned – and they knew exactly how Jesus would live in relationship with those in such need. And knowing that, they went and lived it out.

May we be given the grace to do the same: the grace to know that, while God's work may often be hidden from us, God is present in everyone and every situation. And may we be given the grace to live as Jesus lives so that on the day of his appearing we will hear him say, "well don't, good and faithful servant."

Amen.