

Saint Paul Church 11/22/20A.D. St. Matthew 25: 31-46.

In today's sermon I'd like to tell you three stories. Methodist Bishop and former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, The Rev. Dr. Will Willimon, tells this one,

One Sunday after church we stopped at a restaurant. It was crowded and our server looked tired and weary. After the meal and things were thinning out, I asked her: "You look tired – are you okay?" She told me she had been up most of the night with her little boy who was sick but that she was okay. I said: "It must be hard after being up all night, having to stand on your feet and work so hard." She just nodded. "What's the hardest day of the week to work?" She didn't know I was a Reverend. She said "The hardest day of the week is Sunday. I dread all the people who come here after church. They make so many demands and some of them are so hateful. And they never tip hardly anything."

Bp. Willimon tells that story in the context of a discussion that might be fruitful to have on this particular Sunday. The question under discussion is: "Where is Jesus?" It's Christ the King Sunday on the liturgical calendar. Here at Saint Paul church we're celebrating (more so if we could be in-person), "Thanksgiving Sunday/Christ the King Sunday," So, this today I'd like to pose this question to you, who is Jesus to you and where do you see or find him in your day to day life?

Where IS Jesus? Many of our evangelical brothers and sisters will tell you that He is in our hearts. Some devout Roman Catholics – and some Lutheran, Episcopalians Methodist and the like – who wear or display crucifixes or crosses around their necks, with Jesus’ image permanently attached would say they find him there. All Roman Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans – as well as some other denominations – will tell you that Jesus is present in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist (although the different denominations have very real differences in exactly what that means). I’ve talked with fellow pastors who will tell you that Jesus is between the covers of a black, leather-bound book that they tend to wave around when they preach. But I’m not satisfied with any of these answers alone.

Jesus **IS** found in the Eucharist. Jesus **IS** found in the Holy Bible. He **IS** found in our hearts – and some believe that crucifixes and even painted Icons carry a sacred image of Jesus. But as Dr. Willimon says, none of these places is Jesus’ “primary residence.” Where is Jesus? Look at today’s reading from Saint Matthew’s Gospel. “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.” Jesus is living on the streets. Jesus is in soup kitchen lines. Jesus is waiting at the Salvation Army to get a coat. Jesus is in the hospital, or more likely, suffering and sitting, because He cannot afford to go to the hospital. Jesus is in prison. Jesus is in the faces of those we support through our ministries, such as APPS, Bountiful Blessings and inter-faith food pantry. And even the kids that I come in contact with through our Montessori school here at Saint Paul church. Jesus is in every face that I see when I look at those children.

Now, Jesus says these words today for our hearing. These are the words that Jesus tells us exactly where we can find him. There's no way we can misread what this Gospel account says. "Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." In other words, wherever people are in need, wherever people suffer, wherever people do without their basic needs, Jesus is there. And He's not just there to comfort those who suffer. He is suffering right along with them. That's where Jesus is.

Jesus is not just in the nave, or the sanctuary of Saint Paul Church on Sunday morning, sitting patiently, waiting for Sunday at 10:00a.m. when people come to visit for an hour or so. Because if that were the case, then is Jesus with us right now by not being in the temple building? Sitting at home as we are right now reading this sermon? I believe you know the answer to this question. Jesus is certainly in all these place, but He is in ALL places where we need him to be.

Now again, I'm not saying that Jesus isn't present here, right now. Or worse yet; that He isn't with us in a very real and spiritual way when we are able to celebrate the Holy Eucharist together. I'm not saying that at all. But what I AM saying is that this is not the ONLY place Jesus WANTS us to find Him. He wants us out there in the world, every day, looking to find Him in the heartache and pain that surround us. Church (meaning the gathered people of God) is the place where WE come to feed and nourish OUR souls for this work, the work that calls us to minister to Him in very real and tangible ways. Church is the support WE cannot get along without, the strength we need to continue our ministry.

St. Francis of Assisi, (the almost universally known monk and saint and one of my favorite) was born into a noble family in the 12th Century, in Italy. As a young man, he was the worst type of spoiled, rich kid. He was a musician and a party hardy style of man. He lived for music, poetry, drinking and women – not necessarily in that order. Legend has it that after one of his trips away from home, where he could party without having to hear from his parents about his antics, as Francis was riding his horse toward Assisi, he saw a leper next to the road. Although lepers were every bit as feared and as loathsome in the 12th Century as they were in Jesus’ day, for some reason Francis dismounted and walked over to the leper. He gave the man all the money in his pocket – and then, extraordinarily, he took the man’s hand and kissed it. As he put his lips to the leprous flesh, Francis felt at peace for the first time. He hugged the man, previously considered untouchable and gave him the kiss of peace on his cheek. The man kissed Francis’ cheek in return. St. Francis then got back on his horse and rode away. As he turned to look back at the leper, the man was gone – and Francis knew that he had met and ministered to Jesus himself.

Although St. Francis had been struggling for a long time with the feeling that Jesus was trying to speak with him, it took the presence of this leper to open his eyes to the real Jesus living all around him. And stories like this didn't end with St. Francis. They continue for Christ's saints like us today.

The Christian writer, Ms. Anne Lamott tells about her Presbyterian Church outside San Francisco. This is the place where, not that long ago, Anne became a Christian. She says that "Ken" started coming to her church right after his partner died of AIDS. Ken had the disease as well and Anne Lamott describes him as an emaciated scarecrow of a man, with a lopsided face that lit up when he smiled. Ken told the congregation that when his long-time partner died, Jesus entered into the place in his heart that was broken, and Jesus had never left. Over the year that Ken attended the church, he had won almost everyone over. But there was a woman in the choir, Regora – a huge, black woman from a Southern, evangelical background, who had always been taught that Ken's way of life, indeed Ken himself, was an abomination. To her, Ken was not just suspect, but was someone to be avoided. One day, during the hymn singing, the congregation got to its feet, except Ken, who was too frail and weak to stand alone, and they all started singing, *His Eye Is On The Sparrow*. When they began to sing, "Why do I feel discouraged, why do the shadows fall," Regora began to cry. She left the choir and walked over to Ken. Regora lifted him out of the pew and held him like a small ragdoll. The two of them sang together, cried together, ... WERE children of God together. Ms. Anne Lamott says that she doesn't know if this episode constitutes a full-fledged, no kidding miracle or not. But it's close enough for her.

Jesus is sitting out in the world right now, waiting not for a church worship to start, but for human contact. For caring. For love ... the kind of love our Lord meant when He told us to love our neighbors.

What does all this have to do with The Feast Day of Christ the King? Everything. We bring our reminders today, our thoughts, cares and baggage that represent who we are. And in just a few minutes, we're going to put them all together around our "home altar", wherever that may be in our homes. In a very spiritual way rather in a church building or at home, We all come to God's altar as beggars. Ones who suffer from life's hard aches and worries. These feelings and cares mingle with each other, just as we do before God. When we are able to receive our Lord's life giving body and blood at the church building on Sunday mornings, we are truly blessed and we once more return – into that world where Jesus lives and suffers, as reminders of who you are, and *whose* you are knowing good and well where we get our strength to face each week and every person.

Beginning today, we're going to go into the world with these reminders that every aspect of our lives is a blessing – and that we're called to share those blessings with other people. We're called to share our blessings with **JESUS** our King in our everyday lives.

I care about you giving money to the church, and about your church attendance, and about your activities here. Don't think for a moment that this odd type stewardship message means that I don't care about what goes on at Saint Paul Church and how involved you are in it. But **I DO BELIEVE, ... I HAVE FAITH**, that reminding you about the need to see Jesus in the world and to respond to the needs of Jesus in the world, is also a reminder to give of all that you have, in every way you can, every day, so that Jesus' work can be done by the church as well as by her members.

On this Christ the King Sunday and Thanksgiving Week, I give thanks for all of you. I give thanks for the many fruitful ministries of Saint Paul Church . I give thanks that Jesus rose from the dead and lives in, with, and through our lives today. And I give thanks that He still needs and wants us to meet Him in everything we do and every place we go. Where shall we see him next dear children of God? Where will our Lord Jesus meet us. We always hear the words, “Jesus will meet us right where we are.” However, likewise, may we also find Jesus right where **HE IS** as well.” Right out our doors!! Amen.