

Kirby Lawrence Hill Abington Presbyterian Church
November 26, 2017 Reign of Christ Sunday
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

WHERE IS CHRIST'S REIGN?

Have you ever known someone who saw another in a difficult situation who said, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." It's a saying that evidently was originated by an early leader of the Reformation in 16th century England named John Bradford. While he was imprisoned in the tower of London for his Protestant faith, he saw a group of criminals being led out to their execution and said, "But for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford." ¹

"There, but for the grace of God, go I." The thought is often used as a reason to act with compassion toward someone less fortunate, someone less blessed. It is a way of identifying with someone who is struggling. It closes some of the distance between 'them' and 'us.' If I were in that situation, the thinking goes, I would want someone to respond compassionately.

The congregation I served in Atlanta some years ago was involved with a ministry to the homeless. There were various groups of church members who went in teams one evening each month to prepare dinner and do laundry for men who were generally disabled in some way. The volunteers had gotten involved with doing that form of ministry for a variety of reasons. One of them told me that he worked with the men because his brother struggled with mental illness and was at times wandering from one homeless shelter to the next. He had tried unsuccessfully to keep up with what was going on with his brother, who would only occasionally be in contact with anyone in the family. So this guy's motivation for serving men who were homeless was that it allowed him to imagine that one of them was his brother, and he was caring for him. Indeed, in a way, all of the men were his brothers.

That was similar to what Jesus was saying in this last verbal lesson he offers in Matthew, only he goes further. When we offer the needy food, drink, clothing, or when we welcome, take care of, or visit them, we have done more than we realized, we hear Jesus say. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” How odd that someone described as a heavenly king would identify so closely with those who are among the most marginalized. We are used to hearing about rulers who seem to be interested primarily in money, sex, and power. However this ruler is different.

I grew up being taught that Christianity was about believing certain things about Jesus and God. This faith would open up the way for believers to get to go to heaven when they died. It always bothered me a bit that through belief in the least self-centered person to have ever lived we would be doing something that was in our ultimate best interest. That left me asking, is what we believe used in order to serve Jesus or in serving ourselves?

Now there are other scripture passages in other gospel accounts that speak of faith’s importance. But here in Matthew, we hear a challenge to the notion that we will ultimately be judged solely on our creeds instead of on our deeds. Faith is still the subject here; it just has skin on it and compassion as its heart. When we see pangs that come with hunger or thirst, the loneliness of the stranger, the exposure of the naked, the frailty of the sick, the isolation of the prisoner, faith does not allow us to follow the path of heartless inaction. Yes, it is still faith that is described here in Matthew – an active one. We come to understand that God’s grace goes beyond forgiving our sins and allowing us to have certain blessings in this life. We can look at Jesus in essence and say, there is the grace of God; so should I go. This is far more than just a moral standard that Jesus is establishing here.

He says all who treat with compassionate dignity those who are considered to be at the bottom of society are actually treating their Lord, the ruler of all, in that way. In his life, Jesus closely associated with those who had pressing needs. He treated them as he would have members of his own family. He experienced some of those needs himself – he was hungry during his time of temptations, he was a stranger

among his own people, he was a prisoner by act of religious and political authorities, and he was thirsty and naked while hanging on the cross. He calls upon his followers to show his unique reign by demonstrating God's grace through serving those who are in the greatest need.

The account is one of extremes. He invites us to imagine the glory of the reign that would be given to him by God. He sits on a heavenly throne surrounded by angels. All of the people throughout time are before him to be assessed. They are not judged by how famous or rich or powerful they had been. They are not judged by how often they had gone to church or prayed, although I'm a little uneasy about pointing that out. It is hard to imagine the regal vision of Christ on the cosmic throne being the One who totally identifies with the person waiting out in the cold at the end of the line to the soup kitchen, but Jesus is forthright about it. His connection with the political refugee who has nowhere to go, or the person who languishes in prison is absolutely clear, even in his glorified state. With the Jesus we have come to know, how could it be otherwise?

In the passage, as Jesus described those who had responded with compassion to those who were in need, they were not motivated by any realization that they were serving the Lord by doing what they had done. They were not trying to earn their way to heaven. The ones they served were not people who would probably be able one day to return the favor. That is not the force that shaped their reason for action. They simply had so internalized what Jesus had taught, that they naturally externalized it in how they related to others. They expressed their gratitude unto God for whatever blessings they had experienced by being a conduit for God's blessings to others. They had been blessed by God with a compassion that defined their lives. The reign of Christ was being expressed in their lives.

To live in a way where we not only get to feel compassion, but also get to alleviate suffering is a blessing from God. It can become a way for us to live out Christ's reign, his lordship in our lives. Some people want to cut themselves off from other people's pain. However, we show ourselves to be followers of Jesus Christ, to be those who put him on the highest throne of our lives by giving of ourselves to those in greatest need.

There are opportunities to minister on behalf of, or perhaps to minister to our Lord when we have fed those who were hungry through our Deacon Thanksgiving baskets and food assistance or through work with Aid for Friends. We work with those try to break free from the prison of addiction and the blight of poverty through our partnership with West Kensington Ministry. Through our various mission trips, we have had opportunity to rebuild hope for those whose lives had plenty of reasons for despair. We have helped to fund Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to rebuild homes and communities after hurricanes. Diane just got back from getting to see firsthand how we have been able to partner with a ministry that opens doors for education for those in Pakistan who otherwise would not have such an opportunity. We are in a time of year when we can share joy through the Village's Christmas Hope in Action project to support children and families in need. Others have been involved with care for the sick or support for those who were grieving. I understand some people desire to stay within their comfort zones, but the grace of compassion has a way of breaking down the walls of such zones. And it is a blessing to get to see faith with skin on it. I dare say that some of you have grown in faith as you have served those in need. Hearts come alive. It is wonderful to experience this kind of blessing from the Lord.

But the needs have not all been met – not by a long shot. So let us guard against self-satisfaction and complacency; such attitudes are far from being blessings from God. We do thank God for the measure of the blessing of compassion that has grown in our hearts as a way to live out Christ's reign. May it keep growing, even to the extent that when we see someone who lives with disdain toward those who have need, who lacks compassion in their lives, that like John Bradford, we would say to ourselves, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

¹www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bradford