

## ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25:31-46

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TEXT: Matthew 25:40 “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

PURPOSE: To invite us to see people as God see us: members of one whole community, and to find courage and energy for faithfulness in that vision.

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I’m tired. Tired like falling asleep while watching TV in the evening tired, but also, a deeper tired than that. I’m tired of staring at a computer screen and having to call it ‘ministry.’ I’m tired of not being as pastorally available to people as I’d like to be. I’m tired of working harder than ever to proclaim good news in such a bad news era. I’m tired of the virus and of doing the things we need to do to slow its spread. I’m tired of the chronic polarization of our politics, and of the politicization of almost everything. I’m tired of hearing about disasters piling on top of each other, hurricanes and wildfires and droughts and God knows what else. Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the great prophets of the civil rights movement in the ‘60’s, famously said, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”<sup>1</sup> Me too, Fannie, I am truly sick and tired of being sick and tired. Maybe you’re feeling this kind of tired as well.

We can’t help it: we will bring our weariness into our Thanksgiving. Many of us will be missing loved ones in a grand gathering, and those empty chairs will remind us how tired we are of living pandemically. Or we’ll video chat with distant relatives, grateful that we can do that much, but also, wishing we were really with them, even if it’s only for doing the dishes together or dozing on a Lay-z-boy after we’ve eaten too much turkey.

However, if we pause some time this coming Thursday, really pause and reflect, plenty of reasons for gratitude will come to mind. We can be thankful for the opportunities we have had to be connected with others and supportive of others. New ways to connect like video conferencing, and old ways like meeting outdoors or calling someone on the phone. In spite of all the ways that technology frustrates us, I am grateful for these resources, both for facilitating personal connections and for the ways they have enabled us to do good ministry. On many past Thanksgivings, we may have expressed gratitude for our health. This year, that reason for giving thanks takes on a whole new meaning, because the pandemic has taught us how vulnerable our health is. I myself am deeply grateful for the thousands of people in our country and around the world who have committed themselves to speaking and working for justice, who have advocated for refugees and fought wildfires and documented the ways that the virus has had a disproportionate impact on people of color and people who are poor. And for sure for me, I am grateful for the privilege of serving this congregation, and of working with the people here who have truly given so much to enable us to adapt and be creative and to even enjoy

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.thedailybeast.com/remembering-civil-rights-heroine-fannie-lou-hamer-im-sick-and-tired-of-being-sick-and-tired>

ourselves as we've faced incredibly unexpected challenges.

Worship on the Sunday before Thanksgiving always picks up thanksgiving themes. But this Sunday often is also the last Sunday of the church's liturgical year, which is called "Reign of Christ" Sunday. Reign of Christ Sunday affirms Jesus Christ as sovereign over all people, and indeed, over all of creation. Mixing celebrating Thanksgiving with celebrating the Reign of Christ invites gratitude for the greatest gift of all: for Jesus Christ, who is, to quote the Hallelujah Chorus, "King of kings and Lord of lords, who shall reign forever and ever." Except for this: the world as we see it right now doesn't look like Jesus is in charge of it. There's way too much that's disrupted and corrupted, too many invisible but deadly dangers, too many kings and lords who act like no one is in charge of them. So what are we left with? I find myself being grateful for the gift of a contrary confidence that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, lets me be sure that Jesus Christ is in charge, and even more grateful for the grace that enables us to live in accord with his reign.

The gospel passage appointed for this year's Reign of Christ Sunday is the story Jesus told about what happens when the Son of Man – that's what Jesus called himself – comes in glory to judge the nations. It's about as straightforward of a message as you'll find in all of scripture. People are judged, the story tells us, with regard to whether we fed hungry people, whether we provided water for thirsty people, whether we welcomed strangers, and took care of sick people and cared about imprisoned people. To the surprise of those being judged, the king says that *he* was hungry, and thirsty, and a refugee seeking sanctuary, and a sick person seeking care, and an incarcerated person longing for human contact. "What?" objects both the people who did offer care, and those who didn't. "When did we see you in such distress? Then the king reveals his true nature: as often as you cared for the least members of my family, you were caring for me.

Take note that the criteria for joining the king in his realm or being consigned to the fires of hell are not about having made a proper confession of faith, not about being born again, not about having the right beliefs. What matters is how we treated people in need. You don't need to be a biblical scholar to realize that this is a favorite passage for Christians who build their faith around doing justice and loving mercy. It's certainly served as a foundational text for me. Like many of its fans, I've understood it to be based on a construct which recognizes two distinct groups of people– those who have, and those who don't. And whenever I've preached on it, or taught about it, I've assumed that I'm among the "have's" who have an obligation to act charitably toward the "have not's."

Well, our life on this planet in the midst of a global pandemic has caused me to rethink that dichotomy. I have been aided by an article in the July issue of the *Christian Century* which has been languishing on our coffee table for four months. In that issue,

there is an article by Martha Tatarnic, an Episcopal priest in Ontario, titled, “After the Unveiling.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a stunning essay. It does one of the best jobs of everything I’ve read or heard to interpret the pandemic theologically. In it, Tatarnic says, “I am saying that the God of Christianity has made it abundantly clear that we are here on this planet as beings who are inextricably bound to each other. If we choose to override these bonds of relationship, then we should expect life to go awry.” Later on, she relates this to the relationship between have’s and have-not’s: “We can’t pretend that the way we treat the vulnerable among us doesn’t affect the rest of us too.”

Tatarnic is saying pretty much what Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* back in 1963: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” The point is that we are all members of Jesus’ family, from the least to the greatest. God envisions an inclusive community in which distinctions based on relative security, on degrees of privilege, on race or class or gender or age, all exist within one family, the family of people who are the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Of course the members of this family are diverse, but not in any way which sets up an “us” and a “them.” It’s always and only “us.” We are, indeed, inextricably bound to each other.

There’s another way to do away with the construct which separates those giving care from those receiving it. In Jesus’ story, he is disguised as the one who is hungry, or sick, or a stranger. But Christ’s Church is also known as the Body of Christ, as his living presence in the world. So when we give food to a hungry person or care for a sick person, what actually is happening is that the Body of Christ is caring for Christ in what Mother Teresa called, “his distressing disguise.” Our acts of compassion is Christ caring for Christ.

I carry an image of this deeply embedded in my spiritual life. A long time ago, the fall of 1984 to be exact, as I was concluding ministry at the first church I served, I attended a retreat at a place called Wellspring, in Maryland. Wellspring was a mission of a church movement which embraced a commitment to the inward journey – cultivating deep intimacy with God – and the outward journey – our commitment to justice and compassion. Outside the main hall of that retreat center was a statue of Christ, kneeling, hands outstretched over a bowl, inviting us to let him wash our feet.<sup>3</sup> Seeing that statue made me aware of how needy I was for Christ’s loving care, which I received in full

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/what-if-covid-19-changes-nothing> (vol. 137, No. 16, p.25)

<sup>3</sup>[http://jimilustudios.com/jimilu\\_mason/religious\\_themes.html](http://jimilustudios.com/jimilu_mason/religious_themes.html)

measure from that retreat.

The Keller's moved from that Pennsylvania community to North Carolina, where I served a church until 1990. Then, I was called to serve a church in Germantown, Maryland, which happened to be about five miles from the Wellspring retreat center. I attended a number of retreats there during our years in Maryland. Whenever I was there, I spent a few minutes contemplating the Servant Christ, and expressing gratitude for his care for me.

The church I served did some sort of Christmas drive in support of a mission to dying homeless people in Washington, DC which was part of the same movement as was Wellspring. My church's social outreach minister and I drove into DC to donate what we'd gathered, but also, to check out Christ House, the building where this amazing care of the most vulnerable people took place.<sup>4</sup> There, in front of the house, was the same statue which blessed me on my visits to Wellspring. Only looking the statue there, as I held a garbage bag filled with donations, the tables were turned. The bowl in front of Christ had become a begging bowl. This kneeling Christ was not one offering, but one needing. The two statues in two different settings reveal Christ both as a 'have' and as a 'have not.' Together, they are Jesus Christ, ruler of all, who needs us just as much as we need him.

Back to being tired. Sure, what we're going through is tiring. Sure, we want some relief, some sense that some portion of this massive mess the world is drowning in has found a good resolution. Sure, we want a Thanksgiving which is not clouded by weariness and grief. How about this? Tatarnic said, "we can't pretend that the way we treat the vulnerable among us doesn't affect the rest of us too." That's as true for those of us who treat vulnerable people as belonging to the same family we belong to as for those who treat them as "others," and ignore them. So the whole family benefits when anyone acts with respect and compassion. Think of it this way: compassion overcomes weariness. And anyone's compassionate action toward anyone else benefits everyone in the family. Because we are "inextricably bound to each other," we are being blessed right now because someone is visiting a prisoner, because someone is helping to shelter folks who were evacuated from places devastated by fires and hurricanes.

And yes, taking care of vulnerable people is tiring. But it's a good kind of tired. It's the kind of tired that comes from doing kingdom work, work that heals. It's the kind of tired that we can take to the kneeling Christ, the ruler over all, who will wash our feet and restore our souls.

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<sup>4</sup><https://christhouse.org/>