Christ the King Sunday, Matthew 25:31-46
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Almighty God, as we gather today in thanksgiving for your abundant gifts,teach us to give generously, to receive graciously, and to serve faithfully, that your kingdom may be made known through us. Amen.

My goodness, it is so good to be back here at church. Many of you have heard me say, and I always mean it, Sunday is my favorite day of the week. I love being here with you. For the past two weeks, though, I have had an experience I would not wish upon any of you. Whatever virus has been circulating here in the Northern Neck apparently decided that two weeks would be an entirely reasonable length of time to visit with me. I have not been a very gracious host, I must say.

While that bug was with me, I received excellent care from my husband Charles and my faithful Dalmatian Penny. And while I am deeply grateful for the care I received, I confess that I have not always been a particularly pleasant patient. By some great fortune, I am not often sick but this time I used my time to do some introspection. It turns out that I find it considerably easier to offer help than to accept it.

Nevertheless, during these past two weeks, I have found myself saying some familiar words again and again: "Thank God." Mind you, I am not thanking God because I was thankful for being sick. I give thanks because even in the midst of my misery, I became increasingly aware of the ways God was caring for me through the loving attention and kindness of others. That may be why today's Gospel has spoken to me in a rather different way than it has in previous years.

After reading the text, I went to a trusted resource for some inspiration. John Claypool, who was an Episcopal priest and scholar, wrote a very digestible

commentary on Jesus' parables. The parable in today's gospel text is one that he thought was the most significant parable of them all. Indeed, I think it stands right up there in importance with Jesus' naming of the most important commandments, to love God with all your heart, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

The gospel text begins in a setting where Christ is sitting on his throne in his glory surrounded by all the angels and all the nations. The task that is set before him is to separate the sheep from the goats. Now we know that he is not talking about literal sheep and goats, he is talking about people. If he's not really talking about livestock, is he also not really talking about the end of life? John Claypool suggests that because people tend to read it as a description of the judgement we will face when our lives come to an end. But Claypool believes it is really a warning meant to direct our attention to the choices that we make during our lifetime on earth.

Instead of being brought up to face that reality at the end of our lives, maybe we should consider more deeply the choices that we make each day before we die. God has entrusted us with much. What have we done with that trust? What have we failed to do? The question is not simply how many good deeds we have done. The question is whether we have allowed God's generosity toward us to flow through us as generosity toward others.

In the parable Jesus separates the sheep and the goats. What are the characteristics of sheep and goats that would qualify them as symbolic of human

tendencies? We know from another parable that the sheep are the ones who hear and recognize the shepherd's voice. Goats, on the other hand, are known to be stubborn and more determined to get their way. John Claypool takes this thought a little further. He references C.S Lewis' book The Four Loves when he describes the kind of love that the sheep and the goats tend to show. One shows gift-love and the other shows need-love. Gift-love is the kind of love one would imagine as flowing as from an eternal fountain. Need-love is the kind of love one would expect to see from someone who loves in order that he or she might get something in return. I think human beings are capable of both kinds of love and Jesus does not condemn either one. The problem comes when a person becomes so goat-like that they forget or lose the awareness of the possibility of gift-love.

Jesus is the archetype of gift-love. But did you notice that he identifies himself in this parable with the people who need love; with the people who have no power: the sick, the hungry, the stranger and the imprisoned. He says, "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 the generous, gracious giver and he is the generous, gracious receiver.

Like a lot of Christians, I hear those words and think that I am blessed when I give of myself. But Jesus is saying, too, that I am blessed when I receive what I need - especially when it is given out of love and not just out of a need to satisfy a checklist. Have we been so busy trying to become the hands and feet of

Christ that we have forgotten something equally important: that Christ is also present in the person whose hands are too weak to work, whose feet can no longer carry them, and whose life depends upon the care given by others?

You see, in God's kingdom, needing help is not a failure. It is part of being human. And accepting that help can itself become an act of humility, trust, and grace.

In our Old Testament text for today, the prophet Ezekiel tells us that God declares that he will search for his sheep that go astray, he will bind up the ones who are injured and strengthen the weak. Before Jesus calls us to take on that task as his disciples, God reveals himself as the one who cares deeply for us. We learn gift-love because we have first experienced the gift of God’s enduring love for us. None of us can fully experience the power of that love without first acknowledging our need for it. In his glory, Jesus puts the sheep at his right hand. Those sheep represent people who have acknowledged God’s love and in turn allow God’s generous love flow through them. They are people who have been shaped by a love that reaches beyond themselves.

Christ is in the hearts of those who give and in those who receive. There is no permanent division between those who help and those who need help. We are all members of one flock who are all cared for by one shepherd.

In just a few days we will gather around tables with family and friends to give thanks for the blessings of our lives. Some of us may be remembering those

who are no longer seated beside us. Some of us will be celebrating good health and good fortune. Others of us will be facing uncertainty, loneliness, or illness.

Today we gather around the Lord's table to honor our Shepherd who is Christ the King. We come to the Holy Table not to demonstrate how generous we have been, or how much we have accomplished, or even how strong our faith has become. We come together for the holy communion because we need what God so generously gives to all of us.

When we hold out our hands to receive the bread of life today, let us be reminded that before we were ever capable of giving anything to God, God had already given everything to us.

God's love is the love that sustains us; the love that moves through us; the love that binds us to one another. And that is the love by which Christ our King calls us to live. So as we go out into the world, may we recognize Christ in the people who need our care. May we receive with gratitude the care that others offer us. And may we never forget that every act of genuine love begins with the God who first loved us.

We give God thanks today and every day not because life is always good, but because we know that God is always there. **Thank God.**