

Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a wonderful text for Christ the King Sunday and especially for this week around Saint Nicholas. You couldn't plan a better reading if you tried. I confess I have had a charged relationship with this text. I feel as if it has always convicted me, that it stood over me and judged my life as a weak and worthless disciple. It has told me that I had wandered carelessly through the world, that I was unwilling to see the pain and the need around me. And it has told me at the end of my life I would come before Jesus who would look at me and all the other goats and say, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." And I would say, "Jesus, you know I have spent my life learning your Word, you know that I've gone to church, you know that I studied and read and memorized and prayed. I gave my offering, we did car washes and bake sales and bible studies. When did I neglect you?" And he would make the judgment on me that he does on all the goats in this parable – "As you did not do it for the least of these, you did not do it for me."

And I have always feared this judgment because I knew it was true. Always, that is, until this week.

Did I suddenly become a better person? A more sensitive person, a person more attuned to the needs of others, more courageous, more thoughtful, more caring? No. But I did start hanging around a better class of people.

I started hanging around people like Kathy Dangin and Charlie Bauerdorf. And people like Jack Churchill and the Haesloops and Colleen Hyland and Bruce Schmale and our confirmands. And the In Crowd. And WISC. You see, I think it is hard to decide all by yourself that you want to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger and give clothing and care to people you barely know. But it's a lot easier and more effective to be part of a community that does these things. It's easier and more effective to

be swept up in a crowd, a community, sort of a welcoming, loving, caring mob. We usually think about the bad things that crowds do, but communities can also be sources of great goodness and caring.

I've been struck all week by how active and busy and wonderful Saint Nicholas has been lately. Last Sunday, I was with the middle-schoolers as we packed shoeboxes of presents for children throughout the world through Operation Christmas Child. And I stood there looking kind of lost and said mostly to myself, "What would a 5 to 9 year-old girl want?" So our middle-schoolers patiently walked me through picking up crayons and a candy necklace and coloring book and a bunch of other stuff and I really started getting into the spirit of this thing, thanks to the sheer kindness and gentleness of our youngsters. And they didn't make fun of how lost and out of touch I was. Because it wasn't about me or even about them, it was about a 5 to 9 year-old girl, one of the "least of these" who was going to be getting presents this Christmas that she wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

And nearly every evening this week, I've been with our members who have welcomed people who have no homes into our home, people who have no food to share our food, people whose clothes were torn or soiled to have new clothes. And maybe most important, our volunteers shared caring and friendship and conversation with people who experience mostly fear and contempt from a world that doesn't understand them and doesn't care to.

And we learned that each of these people had a story, a real, human story. Maybe not a happy story, not a successful story, maybe a story that includes misfortune and illness, sorrow and loss. And yet those stories also had hope, inspiration and sometimes faith. Can you imagine how scary it must be to drift off to sleep in the hollow of a tree on the courthouse lawn, prey to drunks and mean-spirited teen-agers and who knows who else? Can you imagine what it is like to have your tent and all your possessions ransacked while you're trying to get some food or visit a doctor

you can't afford? Can you imagine being evicted because you couldn't afford both rent and the doctor bills for your mother's illness because she had no insurance? These were the stories we heard as we talked with our guests.

And yet, these same people would say, I was never afraid. I knew that Jesus was with me, I knew that Jesus would help me and keep me safe. And I would think, oh my goodness, that's more faith than I have. And I am so glad that we had begun operating before the weather got bad. And that we'll be sharing this work with the other churches in the county to make sure that these new friends have warm places to stay and food to eat until the weather turns warmer again. And I pray that we won't see them again next year, though I'm glad we'll be here in case they are too.

And I'm also glad that our young people and grown-ups got a chance to meet and talk with these people, people we probably used to think of as "the least of these." It's harder to think that way anymore. How far are any of us from some medical or financial disaster, how far from a bout of depression that robs us of hope? I've seen bad things happen to people who weren't able to overcome them and I'm not as confident in my own resources as I was when I was younger. I'm lucky enough to be part of networks of family and community so that some catastrophic illness or misfortune would probably not send me into homelessness. Probably. But having met these people, I'm not as sure as I was.

But here's an interesting part. As I talked with Kathy Dargin through a long night keeping watch over our new houseguests, she was saying that she wasn't doing anything that anyone else wouldn't do. Now, I'm not absolutely certain of that. I don't think many people would show the leadership she did. But, more important, in what she was saying, I could hear, "But Lord, when did I see you hungry and give you food, thirsty and give you something to drink, a stranger and welcomed you?" This kind of

modesty is what we frequently hear from saints. I heard it fairly often last week.

I know that this parable of the sheep and the goats sounds like the “works-righteousness” that Luther was so rightly concerned about, people doing good deeds because they want to go to heaven. But, once you’ve done something like Safe Nights, you know quite well that no one does this stuff in order to get into heaven. You might do it because your parents did things like it or just brought you up to be compassionate. You might help because once you might have been in the same situation as the “least of these” or because one day you might be. You help maybe because you believe that we should behave the way the Bible tells us to or because you want to be a better person, or maybe just because you admire people like Kathy and Charlie and want to be more like them. You do it because you are part of a community that cares about the world we live in and wants to make it a more human place, a more Godly place.

These are the kinds of events that change *communities*, for the better. These are the kinds of events that change *people*, for the better. We are a people who have been changed and are being transformed, for the better. “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” And Christ is its King.

Amen.