

26th Sunday after Pentecost A 26 November 2023

Matthew 25:31-46

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God who has faithfully kept us to the end of another Church Year: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"Lord, when was it that we saw you... ?" Let's pray:...

Where's Wally? You know – that little scamp who hides in the detail on the pages of books and provides children with hours of challenge and entertainment trying to find him? Well, today's Gospel reading reminds me of the Where's Wally books only it puts forward a different challenge - Where's Jesus?

Where's Jesus? Many Christian brothers and sisters will tell you that he's in our hearts. All Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox Christians will also tell you that Jesus is present in the sacraments of Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, and in the Holy Bible. All true!

Jesus *is* found in Holy Communion. Jesus *is* found in the Holy Bible. Jesus *is* found in Holy Baptism and he *is* found in our hearts. But today's Gospel reading from St Matthew urges us to broaden our search – "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 welfare shed to get a coat. Jesus *is* in the Lyell Mac, or more likely, suffering in silence, because his ambulance is ramped in the loading bay. Jesus *is* in prison.

Now I'm not suggesting that Jesus isn't present here, right now. Or that he won't be with us in a very real and tangible way when we celebrate Holy Communion together. He is and will be. What I am saying is, this isn't the only place that Jesus wants us to find him. Sure, Church is where we come to have our souls fed and nourished so that we can do the work "which God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). Church is the support we can't do without, the place where we get the strength we need to carry on his ministry on earth. But Jesus also wants us out there in the world, every day, looking for him in the heartache and pain that surround us.

There's a lovely Yiddish (German dialect) proverb that reflects the essence of today's gospel: "Love thy neighbour... even if he plays the trombone." Few of us have the makings of a Mother Teresa. We'll probably never be called on to drag the destitute and dying off the streets and into our homes. But God will place lots of suffering people in our paths. They may not be grateful for your help. And more than likely, they'll be inconvenient and annoying. And yet, they may surprise you in the loveliest of ways as the following story highlights:

Francis of Assisi, (the beloved Saint who preached to the birds) 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 animal. He lived for music, poetry, drinking and women. Legend has it that after one of his trips away from home (where he could party without being nagged by his parents about his antics), Francis was riding his horse toward Assisi and he saw a leper next to the road (Sound familiar?). 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 of the money in his pocket and then, unbelievably, 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. 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'd met and ministered to Jesus himself.

It took the presence of this leper to open Francis' eyes to the real Jesus living all around him. And, these stories continue today.

The poor are always with us. So too, are the frail, the challenged, the depressed, the aged, the troubled, the addicted. They're in our neighbourhoods; even in our families. They exist with every degree of pathology. They're of every age, ethnicity, and condition. Yet, they have one single unifying characteristic. They, like each of us, are made in the image and likeness of God. Their immortal souls reflect their maker. They're God's beloved. Jesus died for each and every one of them. No matter their condition, they're our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must love them because Jesus first loved us.

In this, we hear echoes of [Hebrews 13:2]: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." What a wondrous, delightful, enchanting thought!

This gospel commands us to look beyond each person's brokenness, dents and blemishes, and embrace the radiant vision of Jesus beaming back at us. To see Christ in others we must learn to see through the eyes of love; the eyes of Christ, who is God's love incarnate. Like all other graces, this is a gift from God, not a skill that we can acquire. But once that grace is received, it can't be ignored. It requires practice, courage, and prayerful application. Seeing through the eyes of Christ, living in his love, gives every one of us the opportunity to empty ourselves and be filled with God's grace.

Faith and common purpose drive this shared "vision" of salvation. The central teaching of this gospel is to share the perspective of Jesus, to embrace his vision, to see the world through the eyes of his love. This week's parable poses the question: Lord, when was it that we saw you in need? God's response: Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.

We can't overstate the significance of this gospel. It's Christ's final public statement before giving himself up to the cross and it's the climax of the Church Year. The message is straightforward and imperative. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Welcome the stranger. Nurse the sick. Visit the imprisoned. See Christ and love him in those in need.

Wherever people are in need, wherever people suffer, wherever people struggle without their basic needs, Jesus is there. And he's not just there to comfort those who suffer. He's suffering with them. That's where Jesus is. He's not waiting for a church service to start. He's waiting for human contact. For care. For compassion. For a deep, intimate, abiding relationship bound together with love. The kind of love Jesus meant when he told us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Every day, Jesus calls us to go into the world remembering and being inspired by the fact that every aspect of our lives is a blessing, and that we're called to share those blessings with others. That's when we're most authentically, Church, Saints. That's right. You are Church – the very Body of Christ!

What better time to put today's lesson to work? Our love, energised and empowered by Christ's love, translated into the currency of time, talent and treasure, is needed as much now as ever, both in the congregation and in the community. Jesus has told us where to look for him and how to find him. So, there's nothing to stop us from getting to work, and remember too, that we don't do these things alone because Jesus' promise is, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Today, dear brothers and sisters, I give thanks for each and every one of you. I give thanks that Jesus rose from the dead and lives today. And I give thanks that he, the King of all creation, Lord God Almighty, wants us to meet him in everything we do, every place we go, and every person we meet, to the glory of his holy name.

Hear again, our Lord's gracious invitation and encouragement: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" [25:34]. "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" [25:40]. God bless each and every one of you beautiful Saints. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.