

For the people of St. Philip's
Maria Hoecker, preacher
November 20, 2005 -
Last Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 29) [Christ the King] - Year A

Ezekiel 34:11-17, Psalm 95:1-7a; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Matthew 25:31-46.

Today marks the last Sunday of the Christian year, the Feast of Christ the King. Next week the endless circle of our church year begins again with the first Sunday of Advent. This is also our last Sunday of worship in the parish hall. Next week, the first Sunday of Advent, we will reenter our newly renovated worship space in the church.

I don't know about you, but I don't think much of kings. Try as I might, I have a real hard time putting the words Christ and King together in the same sentence.

The image of Christ as king can be a difficult one for us to embrace. Here stands before us Jesus Christ, ruler of the universe, and the center of our hearts and minds. Yet, in our culture we hold kings and rulers at a distance.

Like all Christians before us, our lives are guided by our images of Christ. Each of us has a favorite image of Christ. We may prefer to picture him as the good shepherd, or as a teacher who embraced children. Still others may think of Jesus as a brother, companion, or friend.

These are not the images we have before us today. Christ as King is one who gives the work back to God's people. Further, what we see is a king who is willing to judge his subjects as to whether or not they do the work he calls them to do.

Sunday after Sunday, 52 Sundays of the year, we say out loud and together, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."
In fact, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says, "...remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Too often we forget that Christ our King is here. He seems invisible to us, on some distant throne at the right hand of God somewhere, yet he says he is with us always, to the end of the age. Jesus tells us this over and over again:

"I am these people. I am with you always to the end of the age. I am the poor. They are always with you. I am always with you. I am them and they are me. Serve me through them."

The Kingdom of God is now. And we are the people of his kingdom.

We are equipped to do the work Christ the King calls us to do. God gives us gifts. Not all of us have the same gifts, but all of us have gifts that are important to God.

I find it interesting that in the Gospel reading today both the righteous and the condemned have a similar lack of awareness of the presence of Christ. Neither the sheep nor the goats have a clue as to why they have been herded into different circles. **It is not in our control, to decide our fate.** "When the character of Christ is formed deep within any disciple, there can be no ulterior motive behind the loving deeds which will be performed. The good news is that when Christ lives within us, it will truly be Christ's deeds, and not our own, that will come forth."

We are asked to choose the way of life instead of the way of death. I have to believe that Jesus isn't commanding us to work ourselves to death. We are simply called to see Christ in all who are in need of our care, trusting that through our prayers, the grace of the Holy Spirit will keep our hearts open and lead us to where we are most needed.

It's a temptation to feel overwhelmed. It seems there are too many hungry and poor and lonely people for us to make any difference. There aren't enough hours in the day to care for all whom we perceive to be in need. We must make faithful choices every hour of every day. To everyone we encounter, Christ among us, young and old, we have to make a choice whether to say, "yes", "no", and "not yet." Sometimes in saying "no," we make space for a deeper. "yes." I thank God that we are not alone in this work. Christ is with us.

There is an interesting story told about the scientist and writer, Loren Eisely. Eisely was in the south of France, on the coast, attending a scientific symposium. He woke early one morning and went for a walk on the beach before sunrise. As he moved through the misty dawn he focused on a faint, far away figure. It was a youth, bending and reaching and flinging his arms, seemingly dancing on the beach. Eisely thought, "No doubt he is dancing in celebration of the new day about to begin."

As he came nearer, he realized the youth was not dancing at all, he was bending to sift through the debris left by the night tide, stopping now and then to pick up a starfish and then, standing, heaving it back into the sea. He asked the youth the purpose of the effort. "The tide has washed the starfish onto the beach, and they cannot return to the sea by themselves," the youth replied. "When the sun rises, they will die, and the people come from town to pick them and sell them in the market place. I throw them back to the sea so they might live another day."

As the youth explained, Eisely surveyed the vast expanse of beach, stretching in both directions beyond his sight. Starfish littered the shore in numbers beyond calculation. The youth's plan seemed hopeless. "But there are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun is up. Surely you cannot expect to make a difference?"

The youth paused to consider his words, then bent to pick up a starfish, whirled around and threw it as far as possible. Turning to the scientist he said simply, "I made a difference to that one," and kept dancing down the beach.

Eisely went back to his room, Until seeing the young man on the beach it had never occurred to him how important it is for one creature to help another, and how the seemingly natural order of things might be dramatically altered by the simple actions of one person.

The next morning, Eisely awoke, and again went down to the sea before dawn. There he joined the youth in the dance of life, one starfish at a time! Never before had he felt so alive and connected to our Creator God.

Whatever talents we have each been given, they are more than sufficient for us to do our part in the dance of life. Each simple action of our lives can make a difference in carrying on Jesus' work of reconciliation in the world.

We are the people who carry out the mission of the church, which is the mission of Jesus, our humble king. This is our life in his kingdom.

Bending, reaching, flinging our arms toward one soul at a time, we bring ourselves closer to others, closer to God and closer to ourselves.