

Christ the King A 2017
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St. Matthew's Kellers Church
November 26, 2017

Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

When I was in school, every once in a while a teacher would give a pop quiz. The announcement to clear everything off your desk, get out a pen or pencil and wait for the quiz to be passed out was always shocking. As with most shocking events, the pop quiz announcement was greeted with a mixture of dread and adrenaline. For all the pop quizzes I ever had in school, though, none was ever open book. It was what you already knew, or nothing.

In today's gospel, at the end of Jesus' teaching, he gives a pop quiz. Well, he doesn't actually give the pop quiz. He announces the scores of the pop quiz that has already been given – when the test-ees didn't even know they were being tested. The people who were found to be the sheep are surprised that they passed. The people who were designated as goats are surprised to find they flunked.

You might say it's not fair for Jesus to announce the scores on a test that people didn't even know they were taking. But what part of "take care of the widow and the orphan, the foreigner residing in your land, the poor and the oppressed" had the people of Jesus' time not heard before? Oh, they had heard it all, many times before. God told the Israelites to care for the widow and the orphan over 20 times in the Old Testament. God told people to care for the foreigner in their land over 30 times in the Old Testament. God's people are told to do justice 80 times in the Old Testament.

This was an open book test. It was a test of how to live life.

Here Jesus is both judge and shepherd, separating the good flocks from the mean. Those who have done nothing to alleviate the suffering of others are on the left side (the bad side); those who alleviated the suffering of others are on the right side (the good side). But Jesus is more than mere judge and shepherd here – Jesus says he is the outcast. He is the one hungry. He is the one thirsty. He is the one naked and in prison. He is the one and sick and dying. (And very soon, in Matthew's gospel, he will be all of those things.) In Matthew's gospel, Jesus starts out as a refugee, escaping from Herod's genocide by fleeing to Egypt; he ends dying, thirsty, on a cross, unjustly executed. In Jesus' pop quiz, everyone who has ever helped someone on the short end of the justice stick has helped him. Everyone who has ever done anything to make the world more just, more balanced, more full of God's shalom, has done so to him.

And all those who have done so are blessed.

And yet, surprised. They didn't know they had done such a good thing. They had only done what was in their heart to do. They felt that they had already received their reward: in knowing that they had helped someone.

These readings for Christ the King Sunday are pretty hard ones. And there is a reason for that. Christ the King Sunday is a fairly new feast day in the church calendar. It was instituted less than a century ago, in 1925, by Pope Pius XI. There were a lot of strange and disturbing political movements taking place in his time – Mussolini and Hitler were on the rise in 1925. Shortly after, the fascists took over in Italy and Germany. Against that background, the pope was determined to lift up the power of Christ over the power of any earthly leaders. He wanted the earthly leaders to bow to Jesus. He wanted them to value God's justice; and if they didn't value God's justice, if they didn't care for the poor, then the pope would call on all the Christians of the world to

do that. That is why these hard readings were chosen for Christ the King Sunday. The reading from Ezekiel, where God says, “I myself will search for my sheep.” And rescue them, feed them, make them lie down, bind up the injured. God says, “I will feed them with justice.”

God has vowed to feed his people with justice because we are what we eat. God wants us to eat justice and breathe justice. God wants justice not only to roll down like waters but also to course through our veins. God wants justice to be so much a part of what we do and who we are that we don't even have to check the book to see if we are following the directions correctly.

Feed the hungry
Welcome the stranger
Clothe the naked
Care for the sick
Visit the imprisoned

This is what we should do, without thinking. Just do it. Not because we hope to win the reward. But we should just do it because we have eaten God's justice – and God's grace – so often that it becomes who we are. We become God's justice and God's grace because we have eaten at God's table. Not just the table of the sacrament of Holy Communion. We also eat at the table of God's Word, in our private devotion and small group study. We eat at the table of God's service, by regularly helping others. We eat at the table of God's love by thinking well of others and sharing the love we have experienced. We eat at the table of justice by sticking up on behalf of others. We can nurture in ourselves all these qualities that God has emphasized time after time in scripture. That is how we eat our way to being God's justice and God's grace. And the fullness of Jesus who fills all in all will overflow from us to others – and we will be surprised. Amen