

Always with Us?

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Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Matthew 26:31-46

In a Peanuts' comic strip dated November 1952, Lucy Van Pelt lecturing her little brother Linus. She says, "You a doctor, ha! That's a big laugh! You could never be a doctor. You know why?" And without waiting for his answer, she continues on triumphantly: "Because you don't love mankind, that's why!" Linus looks at her and responds, "I love mankind...it's people I can't stand!!"

The gap between abstract humanity and the reality of people puts our ethics to the test for better and for worse. Many of us, like Linus, find that the abstraction of our professed compassion can come to a screeching halt when we deal with the particularities and peculiarities of real people. On the other hand, intolerance and bigotry in a variety of forms – racism, homophobia, and sexism – can fall away when someone grows to know a real person, and discovers that working with, living next door to, or worshipping alongside someone different than most of the people in their job, neighborhood, or church isn't such a big deal after all.

Incarnation is at the center of Christian theology and ethics – we think of incarnation as being merely about God becoming human in Jesus Christ, but it's more than just God sharing our human experience. It's about the transcendent God who is beyond us coming among us, and the Divine being present within each of us.

Just as the former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill said that "All politics is local" it turns out that all ethics is incarnational – that is, our ethics can't be reduced to generalities and abstraction. Ethics don't matter unless they show up where we actually live and move and have our being. All love is particular – if you don't love actual people, you don't actually love people.

And we can't claim to really follow Christ unless we can find Jesus in the real people around us, unless we can see the spark of the divine in our friends and in strangers, and until we are reaching out to really feed hungry people, provide clothing to people who are in need, working for justice in real situations, offering shelter to actual homeless people...and until we can recognize that divine spark in ourselves along with our own real needs.

And then as we follow Christ, and entrust our actual needs to God's care, and participate in God's mission of love with real people, we will find ourselves really believing in the power of the living God to change lives... for our lives will be changed, and we will be participating in God's transformation of our community. And the kingdom of God begins to be seen here and now among us.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. We begin a new year next Sunday with a new season, the season of Advent. Theoretically at least, the church year mirrors both the life of Christ and our own faith experience: we begin by searching for God, waiting for Jesus—and we end by submitting to Jesus as King.

Both submission and kingship are somewhat foreign to us. We don't submit easily, we Americans in the 21st century. Our national holiday is Independence Day, after all. Depending on our particular ancestry, we come from people who left other places rather than submit – to the king, to someone else's religion, to starvation, to injustice, to Communism. And the greatest crisis in our national history came in extending independence and agency to those among us who had not come here willingly. Submission is not something that finds much of a home in our national character. And yet, we are also a people who voluntarily bound ourselves to the rule of law; and who joined together in common cause to defeat fascism during World War II.

Indeed the feast of Christ the King was instituted in the 1920's by the Catholic Church in response to what was seen as growing secularism, and took hold in Protestant churches during growing resistance to fascism in Europe – it was an assertion that Jesus is the ultimate authority for us, not the State, and not a secular culture that resists acknowledgement of the sacred. And yet in the United States, while we acknowledge Christ as ruler of all, and God as the ultimate reality in our lives, we also reject theocracy, keeping lines bright between our faith and our government, so that the government can never, under the United States constitution, establish one religion over others. But we are totally free to exercise our concern as citizens about issues that are guided by our faith.

And so part of our discipleship is working to undo unjust systems of racism, sexism, and poverty, and we understand that as part of the missional character of our faith—embracing the mission of God as our own. But some Christians may wonder – is there any point to work against poverty when the Bible even says that the poor will always be with us?? Perhaps we should be limiting our work to charity and not seeking justice?

So we have a few questions in this sermon – first the questions that are particular to the sermon: what does the Bible really say about the poor? And was Jesus just helping individual poor people? Or was he working to dismantle systems of oppression? And then, we will also turn to the questions that should be asked in every sermon: what were these stories saying to the people who first heard them? Where is the Good News in these passages? And how, then, shall we live? Or, what do these stories say to us in our time?

Starting with the passage in Deuteronomy, while the book of Deuteronomy purports to be the last speech of Moses to the people of Israel before they moved into the Promised Land, scholars believe it was written hundreds of years later, when the Hebrew people found themselves conquered and in exile in Babylon. The book was written to answer the questions: why did this happen to us? And, who are we, what is distinctive about us as a people when the Temple has been destroyed and we are not in Jerusalem?

Deuteronomy's answer to why the exile happened is that it was a punishment for disobedience. Much of Deuteronomy is setting out choices – follow the law and you will be blessed, disobey and you will be cursed. But Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that Deuteronomy is full of ethical teachings beyond the either/or questions – the book teaches the people of Israel that they are a people who practice altruism and justice. Again and again throughout Deuteronomy, there are teachings urging care for the poor, for the widow and orphan, for the immigrant. Deuteronomy teaches care for the least among the people. There is a consistent ethic of care for the poor. The message to the people in exile is that who they are as a people is people who practice justice and compassion. And a couple of verses before our reading make it clear that this is supposed to be systemic – the first five verses of the chapter state:

Every seventh year you must cancel all debts. ²This is how the cancellation is to be handled: Creditors will forgive the loans of their fellow Israelites. They won't demand repayment from their neighbors or their relatives because the LORD's year of debt cancellation has been announced. ³You are allowed to demand payment from foreigners, but whatever is owed you from your fellow Israelites you must forgive. ⁴Of course there won't be any poor persons among you because the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, ⁵but only if you carefully obey the LORD your God's voice, by carefully doing every bit of this commandment that I'm giving you right now. [Deuteronomy 15:1-4]

In other words, obedience to God will result in justice for the people and the elimination of poverty. While the Bible acknowledges the likelihood that there will always be poverty, and poor ones among us, the dream of God as described here, and throughout prophetic writings such as Isaiah and Amos, is for the elimination of need. And so helping the poor is part of the obligation of following God.

Jesus, as he began his ministry quoted Isaiah, announcing “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Jesus was clear that his work was systemic in nature, and not just extending charity to individuals.

And the people who were hearing Matthew's Gospel for the first time were a community of Jewish Christians in Antioch who were fairly well off – and were being told that part of being the people of God practicing their faith in the Roman Empire was to extend care to those around them who had less. And they were reminded that Jesus had in fact been working to dismantle systems of oppression – he was, after all, crucified, and crucifixion was a death for enemies of the State not for petty criminals. The form of his death was a recognition of the subversive nature of his ministry, vis-à-vis the Empire and those whose security depended on collusion and complicity with the Empire as was the case for the Temple priests in Jerusalem. The death of Jesus was a political death.

The Good News is the passage is that God still cares about the poor and those in need, that God cares about our needs, our needs for food, for shelter, for justice, and our need to practice justice. Just as in the Garden of Eden, when humans were given the work of tending God's creation, so too are Christians still called to the work of participating in God's mission in the world. So that God not only cares about our physical needs for food, drink, clothing and shelter, but about our vocational need to make a difference in the world, to have good work to do, to find meaning in our work.

And this leads us to the answer of our last question too: how then shall we live? We shall take up God's mission as our own, practicing justice and working to undo systemic injustice and to establish justice as a sign of God's rule on earth. We who are made in the image of God should also embody the compassion and generosity of God in our lives. And then Christ is indeed King if we follow God's ways, if we practice God's will, if we become a sign of God's kingdom, if we are extending God's love to the least, the last, the lonely, and the lost, the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Amen.