

“The Audacity of Christ”**Scripture****Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24** (*The Message*)

¹¹“God, the Master, says: From now on, I myself am the shepherd. I'm going looking for them. ¹²As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms. ¹³I'll bring them back from foreign peoples, gather them from foreign countries, and bring them back to their home country. I'll feed them on the mountains of Israel, along the streams, among their own people. ¹⁴I'll lead them into lush pasture so they can roam the mountain pastures of Israel, graze at leisure, feed in the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make sure they get plenty of rest. ¹⁶I'll go after the lost, I'll collect the strays, I'll doctor the injured, I'll build up the weak ones and oversee the strong ones so they're not exploited.

²⁰“Therefore, God, the Master, says: I myself am stepping in and making things right between the plump sheep and the skinny sheep. ²¹Because you forced your way with shoulder and rump and butted at all the weaker animals with your horns till you scattered them all over the hills, ²²I'll come in and save my dear flock, no longer let them be pushed around. I'll step in and set things right between one sheep and another. ²³“I'll appoint one shepherd over them all: my servant David. He'll feed them. He'll be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, God, will be their God. My servant David will be their prince. I, God, have spoken.

Scripture**Matthew 25:31-46** (*The Message*)

³¹“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. ³²Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, ³³putting sheep to his right and goats to his left. ³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. ³⁵And here's why: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, ³⁶I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷“Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' ³⁹ ⁴⁰Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me - you did it to me.' ⁴¹“Then he will turn to the 'goats,' the ones on his left, and say, 'Get out, worthless goats! You're good for nothing but the fires of hell. ⁴²And why? Because - I was hungry and you gave me no meal, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

⁴³I was homeless and you gave me no bed, I was shivering and you gave me no clothes, Sick and in prison, and you never visited.' ⁴⁴"Then those 'goats' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?' ⁴⁵"He will answer them, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me - you failed to do it to me.' ⁴⁶"Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."

Thanksgiving is on our minds, but instead of giving thanks to the gardener God, the lectionary calendar today is giving us judgment from Christ the King. Did you notice this? We could have skipped it by editing out the judgment against the goats. But we didn't. And how does that make you feel? That doesn't sound much like good news to me, but then again, second looks at what might bother us at first, are sometimes warranted and helpful.

Earlier in the week, I came across how novelist Kathleen Norris read our texts, today. "This talk of judging, of sorting out the sheep," she says on our behalf, "sounds negative and even dangerous. It's not healthy to think in terms of 'us' and 'them, of those who pass the test and those who don't." But then she begins to think about this more deeply, reminding herself that it is often worthwhile to open oneself up to the prophetic word today come from Ezekiel, or the royal word, today from Jesus. So she wonders whether it is the judgment of God (or of Jesus) which gets to us, or is it something within our souls which causes us to blanch?

Norris asks: Does our displeasure with the negatives in these passages come "not so much from fear of taking sides, or of being found on the wrong side even, but from feeling affronted," robbed of our own entitlement to judge? She wonders aloud whether secretly, if do we not sometimes find ourselves thinking: "Isn't it our prerogative to label and condemn? Even people who describe themselves as nonjudgmental are quick to adopt the easy polarizing that marks contemporary America. Before we agree to listen to someone, we want to know if he or she is liberal or conservative; Democrat or Republican; hot or, God-forbid, not."

At root, Norris has a good question. Does this unmentionable identification we may have with judgment, squelch the hopeful and loving thing to which we are really called? Why she hopes that we might look more deeply at our motives and our ways is so might free

our imaginations to find the joy of being like Christ instead of being judged by him.

In fact, if you look closely at the story that Jesus tells in Matthew, you notice what could be a vision for life underneath all of the baloney. In his story, the nations gather around the Son of Man who comes in glory. In other words, the gathered crowd contains innocents, who don't necessarily have a knowledge about Jesus and all of the miracles and the resurrection and such. What they have is a way of living. And he tells how one such way of living is divine.

Notice, neither those called the sheep, nor those called the goats, were anticipating this court of judgment. "When did we see thee hungry, naked or in peril and not treat you well?" Both groups confess the same. Their astonishment that they were under scrutiny helps us know that they weren't even thinking of scrutiny, judgment. But if they were thinking to be compassionate, merciful, kind, then, Jesus seems to say, they were thinking in a divinely imaginative way. Their minds weren't on judgment. They were about compassion.

Tom Long tells a story of this sort about a woman in Asbury Park, New Jersey. At one time, Asbury Park had been a fashionable seaside resort, but those days were long passed so that it had degenerated into seedy, the once glorious past now fallen into a mere holding on before falling into ruin. So, he says, for instance, a once thriving vacation motel has been converted into a run down residence for the elderly who live on Social Security, Medicare and public assistance. It was a place inhabited, shall we say, "to the least of these . . ."

Enter into the picture, Kathleen, who had dreamed as a young child that she would be a missionary, going to exotic places to share the Gospel. It didn't end up that way. Instead, she got married, had children and when the family needed an extra income she went to school to become a public health nurse. As such, Kathleen went to the above mentioned motel, but instead of being welcomed, she was turned away by the management because they did not want to come under scrutiny for the squalid conditions under which the people there were living. And the corrupt city government of Asbury Park backed them up. Yet every time Kathleen went by what she saw was Jesus in a window saying: "I am here with those who are hungry and thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick and in prison." "So she took off her nurse's uniform and put on ordinary clothes and went and down to the hotel incognito and hired herself on as a chambermaid. And each day she

went from room to room to room, changing linens, cleaning toilets, taking blood pressure, checking medications and speaking a word of encouragement. Where none of the rest of us would have seen anything but despair and gaunt sorrow, she saw Jesus” in the least of these his brothers and sisters, and she saw to show compassion and to give aid, to make a visit.

Actually, I don't want to make Kathleen into too much of a hero. What the texts asks of us is not to put ourselves in a position to judge. Let Jesus be the judge. Let God be the one who does the judging. What the text asks of us is that we have the imagination to see Jesus in those right in front of us and to do something to bless. It asks us to notice that there are people in our community who don't have the money to buy heat for the winter months and to help them out. It asks that we heed the news that Interfaith Relief is bringing in more food than ever, but even so, they can't keep their shelves stocked. It asks that we look over the prayer list in the bulletin and to notice that one family had a baby, and one person had surgery and to go by to celebrate with the gift of a meal, or to pay a visit, saying a word of encouragement. It asks us to imagine the plight of a child somewhere in the southern hemisphere, in Ecuador or Malawi or Namibia, who has no medicine or school or rice and to say, we could change that. It asks that we remember the young person in trouble who is locked in at a detention center, to whom we could write and for whom we could pray. And what is really being asked is not about a judgment, either from ourselves or from God, but a fellowship built on compassion and care.

Yes, Thanksgiving is coming on Thursday and we are right to think of giving thanks to the gardener God who shed his grace on thee. But the lectionary has us in these texts that must also go with such thanksgiving. They ask us to let God also be judge, to let Christ be King, noticing that the reign that is sought is one where we are invited to find the one to whom we give thanks in the bonds that we make even with the least of brothers and sisters. Imagine that. And it may even bring more thankfulness to you.