

“When”

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Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Christ the King Sunday/Stewardship Sunday

Matthew 25:31-46

We are attempting to weave together three strands today, and if I do it rather inelegantly, it is not because they are unrelated. They *are* related, both thematically and chronologically, even if it's not so obvious at the outset.

First – it is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a day for great hymns! There are very real and important questions about U.S. history and those who were already here when white people arrived. Even so, I love Thanksgiving. I love its overall lack of commercialization. I love how it is based on a theological concept, gratitude. I love how it never quite gets caught up in the holiday frenzy. I love – on a personal level – lots of football and lots of carbs. There will be less football and less carbs this year. And there will be less of us, or fewer of us, as may be the case for you. COVID has scuttled our family plans, the first time ever when our nuclear unit will not be together; nor will we be able to be with other parts of our families. It's the safe and right thing to do. And it is sad and almost heartbreaking. But it is not as heartbreaking as the reason – COVID – nor as heartbreaking as it is for those quarter of a million families who have lost loved ones, or the millions who have suffered with the disease, or the countless who are treating it and seeking to eradicate it or who are affected economically or psychologically because of it.

In whatever ways you are able to gather, or if you are alone, I wish you every blessing of Thanksgiving. Find gratitude where you can, however you can. And pray without ceasing that we can turn the page on all of this, not only so that next year there can be football and carbohydrates, but that we can all experience health and safety and justice and hope.

Second – it is Stewardship Sunday, which we traditionally mark on this Sunday before Thanksgiving. We would be walking forward in the currently-empty sanctuary to offer our pledge cards, after we had prayerfully discerned an amount to include. We would have shared a meal in Widener Hall, which, I can tell, misses our presence a great deal. We would have felt the physical sense of community as we made our common commitment. I miss all of that. You miss all of that. And yet in this season our ministry moves forward, one tentative step at a time, as we seek to engage each other while keeping it safe and healthy and as case rates continue to escalate.

You have heard fellow members tell why stewardship matters, and why “Walking in Faith” is a spot-on stewardship theme in a moment when we don't know what the next step is but we trust the God who is leading us. Thank you to those who have pledged already, and those who will pledge today. Come by at 9:00 a.m. or noon today with your pledge and some food to donate and you will receive a treat and a gift and a very good feeling. If you can't do it today, do it very soon. It matters. It makes all the difference. We have progress to make from this year to the next, to support our staff, our space, our ministry, even in the face of economic uncertainty. On behalf of your Stewardship

Committee and Session, thank you, as we continue, together, “walking in faith” into a future filled with hope and joy, learning and service, life together.

Third – it is several kinds of liturgical Sundays. It is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Advent begins next Sunday, which is somewhat mind-boggling. The last Sunday of the liturgical year is called Christ the King Sunday, which I have paid more or less attention to over the years. As a liturgical day it is not even 100 years old, which may be in part why I have paid more or less attention to it. Even so, it’s a good way to end and pivot, and the gospel lesson for the day allows us to focus in important ways both on who Christ is and more importantly what he calls us to do.

That happens this year through an iconic passage where we experience Jesus in all his royal glory and all his incarnational clarity. We get a king, Jesus, sitting on a throne, whose inclination toward delineation makes us uneasy. We would want a polite, civil, *nice* Jesus. What we get is a Jesus who separates, sheep and goats, wheat and chaff. But notice how it happens. It is not about wealth. It is not about our credentials. It is not about doctrinal and dogmatic purity. It is about our response to the ethical demands of the gospel.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘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.’” And later; “... just as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did *not* do it to me.”

Charles Cousar helps us understand an extraordinary dynamic that is at play. Christ is king and lord, the one who has left and returned. But he is also the one who has been least and lost, hungry, naked, sick, imprisoned. (Pages 575-577) The greatest of these is also the least of these. “Christ the King,” Cousar writes, “the exalted figure whom the Christian community anticipates and before whom the nations are gathered, is present among the outcast and lonely.”

And then Cousar reminds us of one thing more. We cannot separate the one who judges and the one represented by the poor with the one who is crucified. “The judge has himself become the victim of human judgment.”

Several years ago, the phrase WWJD was in high vogue. WWJD – “What Would Jesus Do.” That phrase came out of a particular part of the American Christian experience with an emphasis on certain responses to certain social issues. I didn’t get a WWJD bracelet or hat or t-shirt or bumper sticker, nor am I likely to do so now. But in retrospect it’s not a bad question – “What Would Jesus Do?” And it gets fully explored today.

When we share the Apostles’ Creed, as we do today, notice something. Creeds often reflect the battles of the moment, and it is clear from word count that who Jesus was was a point of contention in the Apostles’ Creed. Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, he rose from the dead...” Each of

these affirmations matters, because they helped our predecessors in faith, and help us, understand who he was.

Notice what we say about Jesus, and what we don't. In the Apostles' Creed, his earthly ministry is absent: born of the Virgin Mary (and then a whole lot happens that is represented by a comma), suffered under Pontius Pilate. That's not what the debates around the Apostles' Creed were about. But even then, we know – we have this mandate.

On Christ the King Sunday we remember this comprehensive, holistic, integrated vision. Christology, the theologians call it. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. That is the ultimate affirmation we make about him. It's why we can sing both "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name." We may empathize one of those over the other; history certainly has done it. But we needn't get tied up in theological knots, because sometimes it's clearer than we think.

What Would Jesus Do? Or another way to say it is asked this morning. When did we see you, Jesus? When did we see you – naked, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, unwelcome, homeless? When. When, when, when? And he erases any distinction between his royal self and his suffering self, his divine self and his human self. So that whenever we see someone in need – suffering from COVID, victimized by a racist word or action, outcast because of income, unwelcome because of who they love, we see Jesus. We know what he would do, because he did it. Teach. Heal. Welcome. What would Jesus do in a pandemic? What would Jesus do in the face of racial injustice?

If nothing else today, as we think about Jesus, we can re-ask the question "what would Jesus do," and have some sense of a response. He would give. He would share. He would feed. He would comfort. He would confront. He would suffer. He would welcome. He would provoke. We know. And we know – because he tells us – that we are to do the same.

Happy Thanksgiving. Happy Stewardship Sunday. Happy Christ the King Sunday, for which there are few cards at Hallmark. But little matter. We know. Be thankful. Jesus is Lord. Wash your hands. Wear your mask. Walk in love. Spread the faith. When? Now! Thanks be to God. Amen.