

“When Did I See You?”

*Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23;
Matthew 25:31-46*

Reign of Christ Sunday

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Reign of Christ, Proper 29, November 26, 2017, dedicated to Samuel Reppart Shimeall-Evans and Kent Gillespie Shimeall-Evans on their baptismal day and Gil's first birthday, to our Savior Jesus Christ on the Day of His Reign and always to the glory of God!

“When Did I See You?”

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. As the church “counts time,” today is the first day of the final week of this church year. Next Sunday, we begin a new church year with Advent beginning – pointing us toward the birth of Jesus on December 25

The texts from Ezekiel, Ephesians and Matthew all raise a triumphant sound. But, there are no triumphalist notes played. Our Lord and Savior is a Shepherd-King. But, he is not one who Lords over people. He is not one who draws attention to himself through demonstrations of his power and glory. He is one who is found among the needy and marginalized. When you see him and care for him among the

hungry and thirsty strangers; among the naked, sick and imprisoned, you have done God’s work. God’s reign comes when we are compassionate and kind. Christ reigns not on some far away cloud, but right here on earth – when we live out our faith on earth.

The Reign of Christ is never triumphalist. However, the Reign of Christ is always triumphant!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The new film “Wonder” is about what we see with our eyes and how we respond with our heart. Based on R.J. Palacio’s book by the same name, “Wonder” tells the story of August “Auggie” Pullman, a fifth-grade boy who was born with Treacher Collins Syndrome and a cleft palate. Due to 26 surgeries on his face and head, Auggie has been home-schooled by his mother. “Wonder” tells the story of Auggie’s first year in middle school at The Henry Ward Beecher Prep School. There Auggie faces loneliness as he is bullied, ignored and feared by children who stay away from him. All but two

children see Auggie and respond by keeping their distance or bullying him up close. Jack and Summer are the two exceptions. Jack finds in Auggie a true friend. Summer simply wants to be kind. She believes that kindness is the great quality – just like her teacher has told the class. Through a series of difficult breaks in friendship, conflicts and over time, the children are moved by Auggie’s humor, fun-loving presence, perseverance, intelligence, kindness and overall strength of character. In time, those who look and really see Auggie, are changed when they respond with their hearts.

Meanwhile, Auggie’s older Sister, Olivia (mostly called “Via” in the story) has gone through life without anyone really seeing her. Her parents are so focused on Auggie, that Via lives a solitary life. She is a good person. She has a beautiful heart which shines through in the movie. Although she loves her brother deeply, she is like an invisible young woman until the moment when she comes alive on stage in her high school’s production of “Our Town.” Her mother and father “truly see her” for the first time and realize what an amazing young woman she truly is.

Sometimes, in this life, we choose not to look at people or situations because they are too hard for us to face. Sometimes, in this life, the people and situations of our lives are right in

front of us and we never really see them or understand them at all.

All of this brings us to the question of the day.... **“When did I see you?”** This question of “seeing you” weaves throughout the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. The Son of Man comes as a King to judge the all nations. They are arrayed before Him in the form of sheep and goats. He separates the sheep from the goats – or the real followers from the fake followers. The real followers are called sheep and the fake followers are called goats. The sheep SEE and take care of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger (or refugee), the naked, the sick and imprisoned ones. They do it because it is the right thing to do. And when see and respond to each of the six categories of people in need, they are told they have done this for Jesus himself!

Meanwhile, the goats do nothing. The goats aren't “sinners” in the conventional sense. They don't do bad things. They have no sexual indiscretions, no stealing, no murder, nothing like that. They just don't do anything when they see their sisters and brothers hurting and suffering. They simply DON'T see and therefore DON'T care for the same hungry, thirsty, strangers. They simply DON'T see and DON'T care for the naked, sick and imprisoned ones. For their lack of seeing and doing, the goats go to eternal punishment.

Meanwhile, for their selflessness in seeing and responding to the needs of those around them, the sheep go to eternal life.

This passage is packed with judgment – thus the name “the Parable of the Final Judgment.” In the end, this parable proclaims that God judges us in accordance with our reactions to and interactions with the poor and needy. We are not judged according to the knowledge we have amassed, the fame we have acquired, the fortune we have accumulated, but simply on the help we have given. The parable helps us see and do certain things in relation to the sisters and brothers we encounter in this lifetime and the help we must give them.

First, it must be help in simple things. *

When we see someone who is hungry, give the person a meal. If we meet someone who is thirsty, give them a drink of water. If someone is a stranger, welcome them. If someone is sick, go visit them. If someone ends up in prison, go visit them. Each one of these simple actions is something any one of us can do.

Let me extend these six actions to our current times. Recently, I was told by a social worker in the Discovery District that there are over 50 homeless men, women and children living on the streets right around the church. We actually have interviews with them recorded. We know their names and

their stories. They are often hungry and often thirsty. Bring them meals and drinks.

Also, if someone is a stranger – like Auggie Pullman was in his middle school classroom – welcome them. A new student? a new guest to church? A new American or refugee? - Welcome them. When you read the prayers each week and see a name of someone who is sick, go see them. When you are missing a person at church or at work or school – call them and get together with them. There are a number of amazing prison ministries in which various members and friends of First Church are involved with – go to prison and visit someone. Pray with them. Bring them comfort and hope. See people (and yes! See those who are not seen by others!) and Do something for them. From this parable we learn to help in simple ways and DO simple things for others.

Second, this parable teaches us that this help must be uncalculated. *

Those who help in this parable did not think they were doing for jewels in their crowns or blessings from Christ the King! They weren't piling up eternal merit badges. They helped others because it was the right thing to do. They couldn't stop themselves from helping. They offer help as natural, instinctive, uncalculating actions from the heart. On the other

hand, those who did not help, said, *“if only we knew it was you, Lord, we would have helped.”* The one is “of God” and generous beyond measure. The other is self-serving and disguised selfishness.

Finally, Jesus shows us that to serve others is to serve him and to withhold service to others is withhold service to Christ. *

Service beyond self leads to eternal life. Service for self-aggrandizement or lack of service at all leads to eternal punishment. The choices seem clear.

I love the story of the young Francis of Assisi. He was wealthy, high-born and high-spirited. But, he was not a happy human. He felt his life was incomplete. Then one day he was out riding and met a leper who was poor and repulsive - made ugly by his disease. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around the wretched sufferer. In his arms, the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ. In that moment, Francis was changed.

When we learn that generosity without calculation helps people in the simplest ways, we too come to know the joy of helping Jesus Christ himself.

Through the years, my children have fairly accused me of telling the end of a story or a movie – so I blow it for others. Mostly they are right. That is one of my many shortcomings. I won't give away "Wonder." But, I will share with you a quote from the film which captures the essence of our calling to live for Christ and to serve him in this life.

It is a quote from Henry Ward Beecher, "*Greatness lies not in being strong but in the right use of strength. He is the greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own.*" **I pray that your strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of your own heart.**

In the end, the Reign of Christ is really about seeing with our eyes and responding with our heart. As we come to end of this church year, I pray that we begin anew to see people we have been missing – and perhaps passing by on our hurried way to get somewhere for some good reason. When we see them, I pray that we respond with our hearts through simple acts of love and kindness in uncalculating ways. In so doing, we will see the face of Christ and live! Amen.

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- The two sections on "Simple Things" and "Uncalculated" actions are drawn from William Barclay's Commentary on Matthew, Volume II which reflects on this passage.

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