

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 23, 2008, Pentecost 28, dedicated to Henry Robert Wade on his baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Now is the Time! This is the Place!”

Psalm 100, Matthew 25:31-46

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

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Today we celebrate the Reign of Christ the King Sunday. This day marks the final Sunday of the church year and is the church’s universal way to say, “When all is said and done, we worship Christ who reigns in glory.”

Next Sunday marks the beginning of Advent and a new church year. Our alleluias turn to hymns of anticipation on the pathway to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus among us.

Today we close the Gospel of Matthew, whose rich and sometimes troubling texts have provided most of our Gospel lessons over the past 52 Sundays. Next Sunday, the Gospel of Mark will become our guide of faith throughout the coming year. While Matthew has provided challenging parables and teachings throughout the year, Mark is a pithy, stark and fast-paced Gospel that tells the Jesus story with brevity and simple clarity.

Today we also celebrate our 2009 stewardship campaign drive, ***“Honoring our Legacy, Empowering our Future.”*** Today, we enter the final five weeks of this year and look with joy and hope to the year about to break forth in our community of faith and our nation. As people of faith, we have the audacity to hope that 2009 will be better than 2008, despite the challenges we know await us.

The call for all of us to invest in our future at First Church is heartfelt and reasoned. Our Stewardship Committee has put together a great campaign in this sincere belief: we are all in this together and together we will forge a better future for ministry and mission at First Church in 2009.

I know the decision in my household to increase our giving 1% over what we gave this year has not been without struggle. But, we believe that nothing of great value comes unless we extend ourselves in great ways. I hope and pray each of us steps forward to return our letter of intent, if this has not already happened in your case. We will explain how to do this a little later in the service.

Today, Matthew’s Gospel ends with his last parable, appropriately called the “Parable of the Last Judgment.” As the shepherd-king, the Son of Man comes to reign in his glory, the sheep are on his right and the goats on his left. The sheep are serving the shepherd by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the ones in prison. They see Jesus in those around them who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. The shepherd-king says, “When you did it for one of the least of these you did for me.”

Meanwhile, the goats don’t get it. I guess they are busy eating everything in sight. But, apparently, they do not see the hungry, thirsty, stranger, the naked ones, the sick or those in prison. Why? Because if they saw them, they would help them, and they do not help them.

Because of caring for “the least of these” among us, the sheep

(now called “the righteous”) go to eternal life! On the other hand, the goats (who are unrighteous) go to eternal punishment.

The last parable is the clearest one of all. Here it is: God will judge us according to our reaction to human need. We are not judged by how bright we are, the fame we have gained or the fortune we have attained. We are judged by our generosity and the help we have given to our neighbors in need.

Furthermore, the help we give need only be simple. The help is giving a meal to a hungry person, giving a cup of water to a person thirsting, welcoming a stranger who is lost and searching, cheering the sick or visiting the prisoners. These are things that anyone can do. It doesn't take a special degree or require being in a certain job. The kingdom of God is open to anyone with a heart and mind to reach out and care.

Also, the help we give must be uncalculated. The sheep who were helping were not trying to impress anyone. It was natural, instinctive, quiet, uncalculating and clear. The goats say, “If we had only known it was **you, Lord . . .** we would have helped, but we thought it was some common man not worth helping.” But such help is not generosity. It is disguised selfishness.

Clearly, the help that wins God's approval is the help given when the cameras are off, when the spotlights go dark and when the heart of human kindness is extended from one person to the next. This is help that only you and I know in our heart of hearts we are offering (drawn from William Barclay's commentary on Matthew).

The wonderful truth of this parable is: All help given is given to Jesus; all help withheld is withheld from Jesus.

Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold day Martin was entering a city and a beggar stopped him and asked for money. Martin had none, but he took off his soldier's cloak, cut it in half and gave it to the shivering man. That night he had a dream of the

heavenly kingdom. He saw all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them. Jesus was wearing half of a dirty old Roman soldier's cloak. The angel asked him who gave it to him. Jesus answered, "I was cold and my servant Martin gave me his cloak." (Found in William Barclay's commentary on Matthew, Volume II).

Like Martin of Tours, Michelangelo understood and lived this parable. From 1536-1541, he painted "The Last Judgment" on the expanse of the entire wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. Referred to as the Papal Chapel, the Sistine Chapel is where all the bishops gather to choose the next pope. The painting is a dramatic portrayal of the parable of the sheep and the goats. Being carried to heaven are the righteous saints and martyrs. They are apostles as well as simple men and women of faith. Being taken in a rowboat to hell are the unrighteous who have literally "missed the boat" of righteous living.

Minos, judge of the underworld, is painted as the face of Biagio da Cesena, who was the pope's master of ceremonies. When da Cesena demanded that the pope have Michaelangelo change his face in the painting, the pope responded that his jurisdiction did not extend to hell, so the portrait would have to remain.

The faces of the righteous were the faces of saints – some unknown and others well known – the artist knew had lived good and righteous lives. Michelangelo's favorite face was the one of a woman beggar outside the gates of Vatican City, who he had passed on his way to work in the Sistine Chapel. Her face adorns the painting of the saints. My favorite image in the "Last Judgment" is St. Bartholomew releasing his old skin as he ascends to heaven. The saint known for his care of the forsaken, releases his old self as he takes on the new skin of heaven.

Like the Sistine Chapel, many of us are drawn to the beauty of First Church. On this cold November Sunday, each of us has passed by many churches to come here. This is the place and now is the time for us to worship and serve. Today, we have immediate opportunities to

give food to the poor, give blood to the sick and wounded and give our tithes today and in the year ahead to the mission and ministry of this church.

God is calling us to open our hearts to him in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now is the time and this is the place. In clear, simple, uncalculated ways, let us step forward in faith today to love and serve the Lord our God. He is calling us. May we hear him and see him and respond. Amen.

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