

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost and it is also the last Sunday in our church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the new church year. Today is also known in churches as the day of Christ the King. In other churches, it is known as the Sunday commemorating the “Reign of Christ.” The bottom line is that for all churches using the Revised Common Lectionary or the Roman Catholic lectionary, this is the last Sunday after the feast of Pentecost and next Sunday we start the new church year with the First Sunday in Advent. Today we celebrate the eternal reality that Jesus Christ is King.

What are we saying? I think that we are saying that in God’s kingdom, the risen Christ is king of kings and lord of lords. And if we are fortunate enough to be included in his kingdom, then we are his vassals, his servants and his soldiers. If we are Christians, then clearly we want to be considered servant disciples of Jesus, the gospel reading, this morning, tells us how we go about being part of the kingdom of God. Matthew tells it in what is really the great capstone of this whole gospel of love, and he tells it in the great pastoral imagery that Jesus loved so well. Christ the King sits before the gate of heaven separating the masses as a shepherd separates sheep from goats, sending each to its eternal corral. Sheep go to the right, into heaven, the eternal kingdom of God. The goats go to hell. What is the criterion for selection? This really ought to give us pause. The criterion is this: in this life, how did we treat our neighbor? When he was hungry, did we give him food? When he was thirsty, did we give him water? When he was naked, did we cloth him? When he was sick did we care for him, or visit him when he was a prisoner? Because, Jesus said, when you do this for the least of people, you do it to me.

We may tire of hearing again and again this thing about loving neighbor, but do you think that we would find it so consistently in the New Testament if it wasn’t the central theme of our Lord’s teaching? There is nothing more important than reflecting the love that God has given us in Christ by being as Christ to our neighbors. We push this in the church because Christ pushed it. And, if we don’t live this in our lives, we simply are not following the dictates of our Master.

One can be a model of perfection in terms of obedience to God’s moral laws, but if that person has no love, he is a failure in the eyes of Jesus. One can be perfect in piety, praying without ceasing, perfect in church attendance, perfect in tithing, but if he is without love, he is a failure in the eyes of Jesus. Saint Paul said, that of the three great attributes of the practicing Christian, faith, hope and love, the greatest attribute is love. It seems to me that it is also the most difficult. For Christian love, *agape* love, is unconditional and to love unconditionally is to love sacrificially which means placing others before the self and to do this right means to do it daily and this is hard. It is probably the hardest thing that we ever do in life – love others as Christ loves us.

But we cannot escape the fact that this is what Christ calls us to do and it is what he expects of us. As we end this church year, keeping in mind our Lord's great gift of life for us, let us just remember his call that we love others as he loves us. *Amen.*