

Today is the last Sunday in the Season after Pentecost. This Sunday is also known as the Feast Day of Christ the King. The gospel lesson today is Saint Matthew's great cap for our Lord's teaching about life in the Kingdom of God, things we have learned through the reading and examining the parables of the Kingdom. In today's gospel reading we are told how we should live our lives in response to the love of God that we experience in Jesus Christ. Jesus said that when he comes as judge, those to be judged will be seated before him and that he will separate them as a shepherd separates his sheep from his goats. What will be his measure, what will be the criterion for judgment? The answer could not be more straightforward. How have we treated our neighbors? Have we feed the hungry? Have we clothed the naked? Have we given drink to the thirsty? Have we been kind to strangers? Have we cared for the sick? In short, have we been Christ to our neighbors? Jesus said that when we treat those who are unfortunate with loving acts of charity, it is as if we are giving, not to them, but to him. Why would he say that? He said it because first and foremost, Jesus identified with the downtrodden, with the broken, with the unfortunate. Kindness and Christian charity demand that give comfort to those who are afflicted. I think you could argue that being a disciple of the Master also demands that we afflict those who are a bit too comfortable. We have to understand that Christianity demands that we identify the bottom line, and the bottom line for discipleship is that we must love others as Christ loves us.

You have heard this theme almost all summer and well into the fall. The readings we have for Sunday worship would not pound this theme so much were it not central to Christianity. Christianity is about God's love for us expressed Christ's sacrifice on the cross. But it is also very much about our response to God's love, expressed by our own sacrificial love for Jesus, by living out that sacrificial love in ministry to our neighbor. We must never forget what our Lord told us on the night before his death, "I give you a new commandment. Love one another as I love you." He did not give us a suggestion. He did not give us an option. He gave us a commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you."

There are two points to the gospel reading this morning. They are points that we must hear, points that we must learn, points that we must always remember if we want to be children of God, members of the family of Christ. The first is this: Jesus does identify with the forlorn, the downtrodden and those often passed over for the good things in life. There may be, as I said last Sunday, a great riddle of inequality, but Jesus made it clear that those with less are not the ones for us to scorn or to ignore. They are persons given to us for the practice of God's love. The issue is not whether they deserve their fate. The issue is what we can do to alleviate their suffering and help them to know God's love for them in this life.

The second point is this: In the Gospel passage this morning, Jesus implied that those who helped the needy and those who are righteous would be surprised by their Lord's

praise. In the gospel reading, those our Lord praised did not set out to seek his approval. They only wanted to do what is right. We love, not to earn God's love but because, as Saint John has told us, because God first loved us. A Christian's love for others is must be our response to God's initiative of love. *Amen.*