



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**Christ the King Sunday: Nov. 22, 2020**

**Sermon Title: "Where are you, Jesus?"**

**Gospel Text: Matthew 25:31-46**

"Where are you, Jesus? We could really use you right now." If you haven't *said* that over the last few months, you've surely *thought* it. We're in the biggest public health crisis of our lifetimes. Our politics are hopelessly polarized. The economy is fragile. Frazzled parents are trying to work from home while simultaneously homeschooling their kids. Things we took for granted, like attending a football game, eating in a restaurant, gathering with family for Thanksgiving, or visiting an old friend are now activities that we fear might kill us. The whole world feels upside down, out of whack, and out of control. And so it's no surprise that we wonder... "Where are you, Jesus? We could really use you right now."

During this pandemic have you noticed how distorted the passage of time has felt? Things that really didn't happen all that long ago feel as if they took place a *lifetime* ago. Our Church Year is a good example of that. Today is Christ the King Sunday – the last Sunday of the Church Year. Do you remember the *first* Sunday of this Church Year? It was way back on December 1, 2019. Can you remember that day?

I did a little research. On December 1, 2019 at Grace we marked the First Sunday of Advent, and like *today*, our Gospel reading was from Matthew's Gospel. We had four indoor services, we joyfully received 23 new members, and after church we gathered in Harkins Hall for Advent Fest, where we enjoyed the foods and traditions of the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. The Crossfire choir and the Bell Choir both had rehearsals that day, we were making final preparations to welcome Out of the Cold overnight guests into the Miller Center beginning as of Monday, and I was *really* looking forward to Super Wednesday, because Dave and his team had Salisbury Steak on the menu. December 1, 2019 really wasn't all that long ago, and yet it feels so distant, like a bygone era. We long for a return to normalcy, and so we say: "Where are you, Jesus? We could really use you right now."

*This* Sunday – *Christ the King Sunday* – is a recent innovation within the Church. It was proposed in 1925, in the grim aftermath of World War I. People *then*, like us *today*, were wondering where Jesus could be found. And so in Europe the idea arose that we ought to have a Sunday devoted to the kingship of Jesus, because it would remind everyone that Jesus Christ is the *sovereign* of everything in the heavens and on the earth. He is the great *provider*, the great *protector*, the great *power* of the cosmos.

Certainly there's Biblical support for viewing Jesus as a mighty king. Today's lessons speak of our Lord as "a great ruler above all gods";<sup>1</sup> a leader who will seek out, rescue, gather,

feed, bind up, and strengthen his people;<sup>2</sup> and as one seated on a distant, heavenly throne, where he rules with authority and power, over all beings and throughout all time.<sup>3</sup>

And so on this Christ the King Sunday, as we urgently search for our Jesus, one approach is to seek him out in the opulent places we're accustomed to finding kings, and to look for the one who sits upon the jewel-encrusted throne, and who does royal, kingly things, like leading victorious armies, legislating righteousness, administering justice, and providing for the peoples' needs. And so perhaps we must go to the palaces and centers of worldly wealth, privilege, and institutional power if we are to find the Jesus we so desperately need at this time.

But I must admit that when I do this, I walk away in disappointment. In my experience I have not found Jesus dwelling in the halls of worldly power, prestige, ambition, and authority. History has taught me that these kinds of places – governments, corporations, and even churches – are more interested in serving their own interests than the interests of Christ's people. Frankly, it seems foolhardy to search for Jesus among the kings of this world, and so in despair and disappointment we say again, "Where are you, Jesus? We could really use you right now."

What about today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel? Can it help us find Jesus? We need a savior who can bring *security* to our ever-shifting times, *peace* to our non-stop chaos, and *meaning* to lives muddled in confusion, fear, and anxiety. We need a savior who isn't hiding in a *distant palace*, but who is *tantalizingly close*, in the gritty, messy reality of real life.

I don't blame you if you're hesitant to search for Jesus in today's Gospel. The great separation of sheep and goats offers a haunting, demanding scene that reveals in each of us a degree of brokenness and selfishness that we don't want anyone else to see. To some degree we each stand convicted, because we have each seen the hungry and not given food; we have seen the thirsty and not offered something to drink; we have seen the stranger and refused hospitality; we have seen the naked and denied them clothing; we have seen the sick and neglected to offer care; and we have seen the imprisoned and refused to visit. This passage hits us so hard because it is so incredibly *particular* in its demands.

Think about it – no one is threatened or challenged by a generalized notion that God calls us to love others. That's a harmless statement which asks very little of us. In contrast, this passage from Matthew's Gospel is *particular*. It demandingly asks whether we showed love to *that* particular homeless person, *that* particular hungry or thirsty person, *that* particular stranger, *that* particular sick person, and *that* particular prisoner. It calls us to love real people with real faces and real names, not categories or columns on a spreadsheet. To love with *particularity* is *hard*.

But Jesus didn't tell this story just to reveal our sinfulness. He knew there would be times in all of our lives when the world would be an especially scary, overwhelming, and confusing place. He knew there'd be times like now when, in the midst of depression, despair and fear we would be shouting, "Where are you, Jesus? We could really use you right now." And so in this passage, he tells us where we can find him.

You see, our Jesus is like no other king that ever *was* or *ever will be*. His throne is a rough wooden cross, not a comfy, satin chair. His crown is jagged thorns, not polished gold. And you can identify him not from his priceless robes and jewelry, but from the wounds in his hands and feet. If you want to find Jesus – not just an *idea* of Jesus, but Jesus himself – don't seek him in a glitzy palace. You can find him in a particular person who is homeless, hungry, alone, sick, or imprisoned. Jesus is there, waiting to reveal himself to you, waiting to bless you, waiting to comfort you, waiting to transform you, ready to give you hope in these hopeless times.

Someone once asked Mother Teresa how she endured, serving the poorest of the poor, under the harshest and grittiest of conditions. In response, she asked the questioner to spread his hand out on the table, and touching his fingers one-by-one, she said “You. Did. It. To. Me.” She wasn't just serving the poor. She was serving her Jesus. And in the eyes of every dying beggar, she was able to see her precious savior.

Friends, *God is love*, and God made *us* to love and be loved. So in these challenging times, if you're seeking Jesus, then I can point your way forward. Someone somewhere needs your love. Don't hesitate. Don't hold back. And don't be scared. Love and serve that person with *particularity*, because in doing so, you'll find everything you've been seeking and everything you really need. Christ your King will be revealed. Amen.

Citations:

<sup>1</sup> Psa. 95:3

<sup>2</sup> Ezek. 34:11-16

<sup>3</sup> Eph. 1:20-22