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Christ King/Christ Reigns A
Peace, Seattle
November 20, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46

JUDGING THE NATIONS

PRAYER: God of grace and compassion. You reveal your face in the faces of the desolate among us. Fill us with compassion, that we might recognize your face in their own, and welcome them as holy guests. Amen.

The sheep and the goats. Is there a clearer image in the Scriptures of how we're to live our lives as we wait for God's reign to come in all its fullness?

Where, the parable asks, is Christ to be found in the world? Not in the board rooms of decision makers, not among the elite or powerful, but in the back alleys and clandestine prisons of the world, among the plastic tarps of Nickelsville[1]; hidden there among the suffering and vulnerable, he sits, disguised as the least of our brothers and sisters.

> LORD, WHEN DID WE SEE YOU HUNGRY OR THIRSTY OR NAKED OR IN PRISON OR SICK AND HELP YOU?
>
> TRULY I TELL YOU, JUST AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE WHO ARE MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY, YOU DID IT TO ME.

The images from our gospel seem starkly clear, but they raise questions, too.

For example, this parable claims to be a story about how the Son of Man will judge THE NATIONS.

So, who exactly <u>are</u> these "nations"? Are they political entities, like Rome? Modern nation-states? Is Jesus putting the <u>empires</u> of the world on notice that they, too, will have to give an accounting?

Our culture tends to read everything in Scripture through the lens of the individual, but what if this parable isn't about individual judgment? What if we're meant to take that word "<u>nations</u>" quite literally?

What if the parable is about how political entities and powers-that-be will be judged based on their track record with the "least" of their citizens? How might our nation, and other nations, fare then?

Last Thursday we had a guest at our West Seattle pastors' text study. 34th district State Senator Sharon Nelson joined us. Among the things we talked about was what the legislature is going to do with the projected 2 billion dollar hole in the state budget. She wasn't too hopeful.

Faced with huge losses of revenue—and the consequent demand for deep cuts—Democrat and Republican leaders have found common cause in recent months in the daunting task of balancing the budget during tough economic times.

But Senator Nelson said the gloves will likely come off this session as the most wrenching decisions are made on core programs affecting children, education, healthcare, and homelessness.

[1] "Nickelsville" is the name given to a homeless camp in Seattle. It was given that name by the homeless residents of Tent City because they saw in former Seattle mayor Greg Nickels' policy an unwillingness to allow semi-permanent homeless encampments within the city. Read more about the origins of Nickelsville by following this link: http://www.alternet.org/rights/134218/nickelsville%3A_seattle%27s_homeless_name_new_tent_city_after_city%27s_mayor/

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Entire state programs, scaled down to skin and bone over the last biennium, will disappear altogether unless new sources of revenue can be found—and can pass at the ballot box. Among them are programs that attend to the needs of our communities' most vulnerable citizens.

Do you preserve basic healthcare for children who would otherwise be uncovered or provide for early childhood education programs that, in the long run, give children and families a leg up?

Do you keep funding programs that keep developmentally disabled adults in meaningful employment? Or cut them out, forcing many local businesses to lose an integral part of their work force?

Just this week we received the news that **Family Promise** a ministry near and dear to the heart of this congregation from its very inception, will close its doors this week. The pool of grants from city, county and state sources have shrunk to the degree that there are not even crumbs under the table for smaller scale programs like Family Promise, no matter how effective they may be.

Huge, gaping holes are being ripped in the public safety net with no repair in sight.

Meanwhile, some of the biggest and best known corporate entities in our region are doing quite well, thank you, and continuing the successful practice of pitting states against each other in the high stakes game of demanding tax concessions in order to keep jobs within state borders.

I don't envy the governor and legislators as they grapple with what they already admit will be an "immoral" budget. How long can this go on? Who bears ultimate responsibility? Occupy protesters are not the only ones who see the system failing. But where's the political will to change?

This parable of Jesus may indeed be addressed to nations and governments—and, in our day, let's add corporations to the mix—but in a democracy, we who have voices, we who vote, are by no means off the hook.

But let's be clear: the purpose of these parables of judgment in Matthew, like so many of the prophetic words found in Scripture, is not to summarily condemn us, but to help us see things clearly BEFORE it's too late. Like the ghost who came to Ebenezer Scrooge from the future, these texts call us to a new course of action NOW, so that the trajectory of dejection can be replaced by a trajectory of blessing.

In this sense, this word which meets us this morning, meets us both as judgment and as hope.

How different the world appears, says the parable, **when we view the world and its people through the cruciform eyes of Jesus!**

Our life as the baptized begins just here, with how we see—with who we see.
A conversion takes place within us when we follow Jesus, and that conversion begins with our eyes.

An interviewer once asked Mother Teresa to tell him how she was called to serve the poor.
I WASN'T CALLED TO SERVE THE POOR, she answered,
I WAS CALLED TO FOLLOW JESUS AND HE LED ME THERE.

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Who is that across the table from us? A refugee family? A Nicklesville child? A college grad unable to land a job? An elder no longer able to live independently?

> THE WORLD'S POOR AND HUNGRY PEOPLE ARE NOT SOME VAST ANONYMOUS CROWD, writes Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, THEY HAVE A NAME. AND OUR FAITH SAYS THEIR NAME IS JESUS.

It begins with the eyes. But it doesn't stop there. For the Lord is not content to have our eyes only, he wants our whole lives, all of us, and that's God's message to us in baptism:

> **YOU ARE MINE, not for a little while, not for this one period of joy or crisis,**
> **but for the duration, for ever.**

This is why the New Testament gives us so many images for what the sacrament of baptism is about.

- It's being buried with Christ in the grave and being raised up with him in resurrection
- It's being reborn—from above
- It's being washed clean from the inside out, and beginning life anew
- It's being grafted onto the True Vine and finding all we need to thrive from him
- It's trading in the rags of our former lives and clothing ourselves with Christ
- It's receiving a sign and seal of approval that will never fade

Baptism marks a beginning so profoundly new that no single image can capture the depth and breath of what God is doing here, so the images keep getting heaped up, one on top of another, as if to say, DO YOU GET IT? NO? LET ME SHOW YOU WHAT WE MEAN IN YET ANOTHER WAY…

Little Luna receives that sacred sign today as she passes through the waters and enters into this way of living, and we as community pledge ourselves to join hands with Howie and Anne, Les and Tara, in raising her wet. This is a public act, not a private one. And it comes, as we'll soon hear, with gifts as well as responsibilities.

Of course there's a risk we take when we commit ourselves to each other in this way. There's a risk in declaring, as the sisters and brothers who join us today will say, WE'RE READY TO BE PLANTED IN THIS CORNER OF GOD'S VINEYARD, READY TO BE CONNECTED TO THIS PARTICULAR CONGREGATION, ITS LIFE AND ITS MISSION, WITH ALL ITS POSSIBILITIES AND LIABILITIES.

Will we disappoint? Likely. Will we fall short? Surely. Yet, will our eyes recognize the Christ in each other? Will we be for one another "little Christs," responding to needs, sharing our gifts, attending to the last, the least, and the lost within and beyond our doors? That is our hope. A hope founded not in ourselves but instead in the one who emptied heaven to show us the way, the truth, and the life.

At the Font and at the Table we are reminded once more that nobody, nobody can out-risk God.

And because that is true, we too can take risks…can lift our voices; can take our witness to the public square; can keep before us the faces of all the little ones of this world, who are none other than Christ himself.

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Let us pray: Lord Jesus, hope of the hopeless, in baptism you give us eyes to recognize your face among the forgotten and destitute ones of this world. Give us the courage, the wisdom, and the tenacity to feed, clothe, visit, welcome, and serve; to offer ourselves as you have offered yourself, and so transform the world. May it be so. Amen.