

Sermon “The Element of Surprise”

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Matthew 25:31-46

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On this Christ the King Sunday, these words of Ezekiel are a powerful reminder that even as God cares for “the least of these,” God expects nothing less from kings and ordinary people. How a society and its leaders treat those who struggle against disadvantages speaks volumes about the society’s core values. Hear what the Spirit is saying.

11 For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. Amen.

As we turn to our gospel reading in Matthew 25:31-46, the well-known story of the final judgement and the separation of those who did and did not care for the least, we find a surprising judge. We find Christ the King, who identified with the outcast and lowly and who, himself was a victim of human judgement. The One who renders verdicts among the nations is an unprecedented Judge. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.’ 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45 Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Amen.

The title of the sermon: The Element of Surprise

The Text: Lord, when did we see you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you a drink? And when did we see you a stranger, and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing.” Matthew 25:37b-38

Let us pray. Lord, may our lives be surprisingly filled with your gracious ways. As we reflect together on this Christ the King Sunday, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Elements of Surprise is the name of a book written by Dr. Vera Tobin which explores the art of writing stories to create those revelatory plots with surprise endings that delight the reader. Tobin who is a professor of Cognitive Science at Case Western Reserve University shows that building a good plot twist is a complex art that reflects a sophisticated understanding of the human mind. Reading classic, popular, and obscure literature alongside the latest research in cognitive science, Tobin argues that a good surprise works by taking advantage of our mental limits. Our cognitive biases, mental shortcuts, and quirks of memory conspire with stories to produce wondrous illusions. The interactions of plot and cognition reveal the interdependencies of surprise, sympathy, and sense-making.

As we culminate the Christian liturgical year today on Christ the King Sunday and celebrate the Scottish heritage of our Presbyterian faith in an empty sanctuary, it is fair to say this has been an unexpected year with surprises that continue to baffle us. We wonder how it is with all the scientific advances we have made (something for which the Kieffer Family is particularly grateful following the collaboration and expertise within the operating room of Peter’s successful heart surgery), how it is that our economy and life as we know it could be so impacted in such surprising ways by this tiny, yet ubiquitous and potentially deadly virus.

Perhaps what has baffled us more is the diverse response to and the division caused by the virus. Human biases, defense mechanisms, (i.e. Denial is more than a river in Egypt), and mental limitations have risen to the surface in ways that are not only surprising, they are disconcerting. And to top off a year of surprise like none other, rather than rejoicing in the good news of the remarkable accomplishments of creating effective vaccines at an unprecedented speed, the news cycle is dominated by the surprising turn of events that the validity of our democratic election, the foundation of this country, is being questioned, without evidence, by our President.

One of the phrases which has provided comfort in the Kieffer Home through the years is the saying “You win some, you lose some!” Who among us has not experienced the disappointment of loss? Loss can be a character building experience, lessons can be learned, and understandings gained. Through loss, we become better, more compassionate people.

In fact, the surprising good news of the gospel we proclaim is that we have a God who was willing to lose on our behalf. We have a God who cares for us like a shepherd who seeks out the most vulnerable and who holds kings and leaders responsible when they do not lead in like manner.

My friends, let us take time out during these days at home to pick up a well written book with a surprise ending to delight us. This Thanksgiving week, let us fill our homes with music, fragrant foods, and prayers of gratitude for the family which may not be at our table, yet is with us in spirit. Let us give thanks for this faith community who believes we are in the world,

and in this particular neighborhood, for service, and let us rejoice in the element of surprise within our faith story.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we proclaim that Christ is like no other king we have ever known. Jesus not only identified with those who were marginal in society, teaching and healing “the least of these,” he also suffered a humiliating death when he was unfairly judged for a crime he never committed. He suffered with dignity and did not come down from the cross, even when the leaders and soldiers bullied and mocked him. As Christians we can never separate Christ the King from the cross he climbed, from the peace he proclaimed, and from the wounds he took upon himself to make us whole.

As our parable reminds us in today’s gospel reading, when the nations are gathered before the Son of Man, we are each responsible for the way we live our lives, for the ways we treat the “least of these.” In this parable we are reminded of the importance of “the spirit of humanity,” a spirit which knows no limits of race or class but expresses itself in kindly helpfulness wherever there is need and distress.

This is a teaching which is consistent with the ethical spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Koran. As Ezekiel proclaims about the God of Abraham. *I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...*

There is no question that the most striking aspect of Jesus’ parable is the element of surprise on the Judgement Day. Some discover that, although they did not know it, they have been on God’s side all the time. The surprise of the righteous is perhaps the most touching of the story.

However, the righteous ones are not the only to be surprised. Some, who believe they are on God’s side are surprised to learn that all along they have not been. Their faith, without love, had become merely a ritual observance or a correct creed. If the surprise of the righteous is the most touching, the surprise of those who thought they were the righteous is the most tragic.

If we remember anything about the last Judgement on this Christ the King Sunday, let us remember the element of surprise. Life on the final day will be no different than life itself. There are no guarantees or certainties. Love is given and received freely and love is at its best when there is an element of surprise: the unexpected act of kindness, the utterly delightful gesture of forgiveness, the undeserved generosity, risking our own safety to save others. This is grace. This is amazing grace. So even as we remember this element of surprise in the last day, may we be people of surprises in these days.

Truly, I say to you, as you did to the least of these, you did it to me. Amen.