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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Feast of Christ the King –Sunday, November 22, 2020
Matthew 25:31-46

As the Psalmist wrote: Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are so much more connected to each other than we realize. It is as if there are invisible threads linking us to each other in mysterious ways. Have you ever noticed when you've been sitting across the table from someone and deep into conversation, that you have started to mirror their body language? You know, how you can be engaged in conversation with someone and suddenly became aware that you are sitting in exactly the same way as the other person? Without intending to or realizing it, you have replicated the other person's body language.

In psychological terminology, this is called body mirroring. It happens when one person subconsciously imitates the gesture, speech pattern, or attitude of another. Experts say that body mirroring is a subconscious way in which we express solidarity with another person – a way that we instinctively demonstrate connection with the other. They say it positively affects the other's feelings towards the one exhibiting the mirroring behaviors and builds rapport by strengthening connection and empathy between the two. It does this by activating mirror neurons within the brains of both.

A mirror neuron is one that fires both when one person acts and when the other observes the actions performed. Thus, the neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were the one doing the acting. Some neuroscientists have argued that mirror neurons are the neural basis for the human capacity of emotions such as empathy. Mirroring is quite literally how we reflect each other.

Human beings are made for connection and relationship. We are biologically and evolutionarily designed to communicate and connect with one another – it is one of the things we do better than any other species. There was a neurological study out of Princeton where they had people hooked up to fMRI scanners and they had one person tell a personal story while the others listened in an engaged way. And they found that the brain waves synched up – the listeners' brain waves matched the brain waves of the speaker; they mirrored each other. So closely in fact, that at times the listeners' brain waves would anticipate changes in the speaker by a fraction of a second. Called neuro coupling, it was as if both the listener and the speaker were physically connected and jointly experiencing the story being told. We are so much more connected to each other than we realize. We truly are made to be One Together.

In the church calendar, today is the last Sunday of the long season after Pentecost and is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday, we will begin the season of Advent; the season in which we wait in the winter stillness for the coming of Immanuel, God with us. But today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, on which day we rejoice in Christ's kingship and dominion now as well as in the age to come.

Our Gospel lesson for today is from the only description of the final judgment in the New Testament. In it, Jesus teaches that the Son of Man will return and sit upon the throne of glory. All the nations will be gathered before this king, and, like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, he will separate the people into two groups: the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous are placed at the king's right hand, while the unrighteous are placed at his left. The king states that the righteous are those who cared for and served the king when he was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned – they are blessed and rewarded with eternal life. The unrighteous, however, were those who did not care for the king when in need and are cast out into eternal punishment.

What makes the story so interesting to me is that those who were rewarded were surprised. They ask, "When, Lord, did we feed you when you were hungry, give you drink when you were thirsty,

clothe you when naked, nurse you when sick, or visit you when you were imprisoned?" Surely, they think, we would have remembered this. The king answered them, "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." Likewise, the unrighteous ask, "Lord, when were you hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, or imprisoned and we did not care for you?" Surely, they think, we would never have refused to serve the king of glory – who would do that? But to them, the king responds that the inverse is also true: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do to the least of these, you did not do it to me." Both groups are stunned – this is not how they understood things to work.

With this lesson, Jesus institutes an entirely new structure of ethics – a morality based not upon beliefs, sectarian affiliations, orthodoxy, nor proper worship and sacraments. Rather, it is based upon how one treats others, especially those most vulnerable and in need of compassion and care. In caring for them, one is paradoxically caring for God. As one scholar writes, "There is only one criterion for salvation here, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name." In this lesson, Jesus equates himself with the least of these. This king is not to be known because he sits on the throne of glory in all majesty. Rather, this king is known within the faces of those in need of our compassion. Indeed, Jesus states that the best, maybe the only, way to serve the king of glory is to serve the very least among us.

This new ethic demands that the followers of Jesus recognize the God-given dignity and value of every human being – especially those for whom society has deemed as less worthy. Pope Francis often speaks of this moral law as God's preferential option for the poor, and Father Richard Rohr calls it God's "bias from the bottom." As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a preferential option for the poor in which we view our actions and decisions through the lens of the poor and vulnerable. Our own prayer book uses the language of our seeking the "common good" to mean this same thing – this call to solidarity with those most in need of compassion and care.

This is a dramatic departure from the imagery most common and expected of kingship. This is the king who points our attention always beyond himself. This is the king who identifies so strongly with the poor, vulnerable, sick, and imprisoned that he calls his followers to seek and serve him there. If you want to serve this king, then serve the needy and least kingly among us. If you want to be blessed, then bless others, especially those whom the world sees as unworthy of blessing. If you want to experience salvation, then look beyond yourself and provide the salve for the wounds of others. If you want to be loved, then love those who are most unlovable - it is in doing so that you find yourself beloved of God. For it is in faces such as these, that the face of the king of creation – the king of glory – may be seen.

We are so much more connected to each other than we realize. We are connected to each other not only because of our shared humanity but also because each of us bears the image of God upon our souls. Science keeps discovering new ways in which our connectivity and interdependence is evident. Whether in the magical alignment of our brain waves when sharing a personal experience, to how we mirror each other's body language when engaged in conversation, to the remarkable ways in which we are fed when we feed others – spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

We are truly made for relationship – made for community – made to be One Together. While our culture exhorts the value of independent self-reliance, Jesus teaches us that our salvation may be found in communal witness, rather than solitary reward. His mission and ministry demonstrate that the living waters of everlasting life are found in community – in relationship – as members of his family. And it is here where we may find the kingdom of God taking root – when we live in community with each other, looking for and recognizing the face of Jesus in each one of us.

Amen.