

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

The summer I was eleven I went to church camp for the first time. Nestled in the woods of southern Indiana, close to the town of Bean Blossom, Waycross Camp was where I first encountered today's Gospel story from Matthew.

It was, of course, if you know anything about church camp, in the form of a skit. It went like this.

A woman was sitting at home reading a book when the phone rang. Surprise! It was Jesus! And he was calling to say he was coming to visit today! So the woman started to do all those things you would naturally do if Jesus is coming – vacuum, dust, bake cookies.

Only, as she attempted to get ready, she kept getting interrupted by people knocking at her door.

First it was a neighbor who smelled the cookies baking and was hungry. But the woman was impatient – the cookies weren't ready yet and she didn't really want this person just hanging around until they were done. In case Jesus arrived. So she told him she was expecting company, so not today, and sent him on his way.

The next knock at the door was a group of neighborhood kids who had been running around and playing, and were hoping for some lemonade (she was known to share it usually). But they were dirty and dusty and covered in grass stains and she didn't want them tramping into her clean house before Jesus arrived, so she told them to run around back and drink from the garden hose (this was the 80's, we still did that then!).

Just as soon as she returned to her chores someone else was at the door. This time it was a neighbor who sick. The last thing she wanted was to do was leave to take her to the doctor – she might miss Jesus! And because these were the days before 911, she told the neighbor to go see if another neighbors could take her to the hospital.

The woman closed the door, went to pull the cookies out of the oven and placed them on a cooling rack, then she sat down to wait. She waited. She waited some more. There were no more knocks. But then the phone rang. It was Jesus!

She was so flustered from waiting she said to Jesus, "You're late! Are you still planning to visit today?" Jesus of course replied that he had already visited. Three times. And that each time instead of inviting him in, she had turned him away.

It was all very dramatic, around a campfire ring out in the woods. I imagine there was some sort of group discussion or art activity afterwards that I don't remember. We probably sang *One Tin Soldier* or *Both Sides Now* while counselor Todd played the acoustic guitar.

What I do remember was the way I felt – a live with the Spirit. It was as if the pieces of the puzzle for what it meant to **be** a Christian slotted into place for me. My heart was on fire.

I was eleven knew nothing of the salvation through works versus grace debate. Nor do I remember the eschatological framework of the sorting of the sheep and goats.

What I took away from the story was that God is in each of us and we have a responsibility to care for one another – and that means we have to **pay attention**.

Though over the years my understanding of this Gospel has shifted, and new insights have emerged, this has remained my guiding scripture.

I share this story with you today, because this Gospel is one of three in the lectionary cycle that is chosen for the last Sunday of the church year – the Feast of Christ the King – and I believe it tells us just as much, if not more, about who we are called to be as followers of Christ as it does about him enthroned in glory.

Perhaps that is what this feast points us toward.

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Theologian and mystic Thomas Merton wrote that our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.

That is so often, so much harder than we might imagine.

Over and over again in the Gospels we see Jesus loving without boundaries and without question. And yet even for him there was that one time he messed up, you know, that time with the Canaanite woman who begged him to heal her daughter.

She called him out when he attempted to set a limit on love, and his response was not only to heal the girl, but to throw open his healing embrace – and in the following verses he healed a multitude along the Sea of Galilee over the course of three days before the feeding of the four thousand gathered there.

The lesson here is not that we must be – or even **can be** – perfect in our love of others. But there is something fundamental to be learned from living and loving as widely, abundantly, and fully as possible.

Presbyterian Pastor, and former editor of *The Christian Century* magazine, John Buchanan, had this to say in reflection on this Gospel:

God wants to save our souls and redeem us and give us the gift of life – true, deep, authentic human life.

God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love. God wants to save us by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us.

God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, by persuading us to forget about ourselves and worry about others.

This is God's favorite project: to teach you and me the fundamental lesson, the secret, the truth - that to love is to live.¹

And to live, for Christians, is to love.

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So it is, that maybe, instead of being the last Sunday of the church year – and an ending – today's Feast of Christ the King is better understood as the **eve** of a **new year**, a thin space in which we stand – and from which we can look back, but more importantly from which we are being called forward in love.

I have always thought of this Sunday of the year as the capstone, as it were. But just maybe it exists as a **both/and** – distilling a final message of who Jesus was and what it means to be Christ's followers, while at the same time beginning to prepare us for the Incarnation.

¹ John M. Buchanan, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*

For next Sunday, when we enter Advent, is it not only the start of our church year, it is also the beginning of the time we set aside and return to every year to prepare to come close to the Mystery of Christmas – when God became flesh and the fullness of love was born among us.

Matthew points us toward this beginning, and gives us a key to coming close to the Mystery.

Because just like the woman in the skit I saw at church camp all those years ago, sometimes people can walk right through a mystery and not even know it's there.

And when our vision turns myopic and we succumb to the slavery of everyday busyness, and life in all its complexities, we need to be persuaded by God's love to remember how it is that we are to come close to the Mystery.

It is through *living*, and *loving*, and *serving* – for when we take care of one another, and most importantly the most vulnerable in our midst, we not only come close, we **enter** the Mystery and are welcomed to the feast.

What this looks like for each of us is, and will be, different. Many of you may already serve in various ways through our church or out in the community. Others give regularly to charities you believe in. The love given in these acts is offers transformation in our broken world.

That is who Jesus was, it is who we are called to be.

My prayer is that as we come together today to worship, we come to know more deeply that we are never alone in the work we are called into. In a world that seems too big to be changed, we believe that together our lives have more meaning and value than we can imagine, because Jesus is the shepherd who guides us, and the One who will come in glory when the Reign of God is fulfilled.

So pay attention, and when the phone rings, when there is a knock at the door, answer with love, as if life itself depends on it.

~ AMEN ~