

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2020

(Matthew 25:31-46)

This morning's Gospel reading is at its very heart what I have long believed to be the truth about this congregation. You've heard me talk about it often; I've written about it just as much; it's one of the main descriptors I use when talking about this church to others.

You are a Matthew 25 congregation, and the verses this morning are a narrative summary of why I write and say that. Feeding the hungry; welcoming the stranger; giving something to drink to the thirsty. These are second nature to this community, through outreach to the world by the food pantry and through the things large and small you do for your friends and neighbors *every day*. In thinking about this sermon though I realized there is something else at work, something of which we may lose sight (and certainly something of which I admittedly lose sight). It's an idea we find in the words of the Prayer of St. Francis: "For it is in giving that we receive."

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In those times when I cite theologians or religious writers in my sermons I often rely on those of more recent decades. However, there are instances when I'm prompted to go back to the earliest building blocks of the Church, those influential and foundational theologians known as the Church Fathers. (I'll interject here there also were Church Mothers who were of immeasurable importance to the foundations of our faith, so my use of that phrase is in no way intended to diminish their contributions. I simply use it as a descriptor for my thoughts this morning.) The North African Bishop Augustine of Hippo, known commonly as Saint Augustine, is one of those to whom I will turn from time to time. I did so here and was incredibly surprised at what I discovered.

This morning's passage was of great importance to him. "For Augustine, the voice of Christ in Matthew 25:31-46 is, only with some exaggeration, everywhere. He cites this passage 275 times in his works."¹ Listen to that again: Augustine talks about this one passage from Matthew in his sermons and other work *275 times*.

Something with this resonated deeply with him, and he reflected on and wrote about it extensively. But he did so in a way I found incredibly powerful, for he focused just as much on the last verse of the passage as he did on the ones that I suspect resonate more often with us. He focused on what we receive for our action or inaction as much as he did on the action or inaction itself.

Let me share these two passages from his Sermon 389. First: "A poor man comes humbly begging, and receives something from you – because if it is unfitting for you to be proud in giving, how much more should he avoid pride in receiving; he receives it humbly, and thanks you for it. You, all the same, should know full well, and never forget, not only what

¹ Andrew Hofer OP. Introduction to "Matthew 25:31-46 as an Hermeneutical Rule in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*," <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/001258060812644505>.

you are giving, but also what you are receiving.”² Later he writes, “Christ has received what you have given; it has been received by the one who gave you the means to give it; it has been received by the one who at the end will give you himself.”³

The theologian Daniel Ott has written about how this passage from Matthew is “an important reminder that what we do matters.” We’ve already received God’s love and grace, yes; those are things we get without any conditions placed on them. But there’s more; as he says, “[T]here is nothing that we need to do to earn them [grace and love], but that does not mean that we can forget to care for the least ... If we do not care for Christ, then how can we expect him to judge in our favor?”⁴

So in considering this, *what do we receive?* Well before we do anything, as Ott points out, we have already received God’s love and grace. Those gifts are ours before we even lift a finger or take the first step. Then as we actively work on behalf of others, we receive the knowledge – particularly if we remember the words of this passage – that *in helping the least we have helped the greatest*. In helping those who are struggling we help the one who has defeated all struggles. In the end, *when we do for others we receive Christ*. We receive favorable judgment and favorable consideration, of course, but *we receive Christ*.

Last week I talked about the willingness to take risks, rooted in the reading that day of the Parable of the Talents. That idea – the idea of risk-taking – is still very much present even in this reading. I won’t go on at length about it again. However, at the risk of angering Biblical translators and scholars I want to add a few words to some of the verses from this passage and ask you to do nothing more than think about them. Beginning at verse 37, listen for the addition.

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, *took a risk* and gave you food, or thirsty, *took a risk* and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger, *took a risk* and welcomed you, or naked, *took a risk* and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison, *took a risk* and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you *took a risk* and did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Remember: risk isn’t something we take on; it is an action. *How will we act?*

I want to end with something I’ve spoken of in the past and which I’d like to share again. There is a well-known short story by the author Leo Tolstoy entitled, “Where Love Is, God Is.” It tells of a poor cobbler named Martin, who while reading the Bible one day is told by the voice of an unseen person to look at the street the next day, “for I shall come.” Knowing with great certainty that he is about to see Jesus, he prepares for his guest. The next day, while waiting, he sees a man clearing snow from the street and invites him in for tea. Later, he sees a peasant woman carrying a child, both poorly dressed and obviously impacted by the cold – and he invites the woman to come in so that they can warm themselves and be fed. Still later he sees a young boy stealing an apple from an old vendor, and he intervenes on behalf of the boy and pays for the apple while teaching the boy the importance of asking

² Augustine of Hippo. “Sermon 389,” from *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century; Part III: Sermons, Vol. 10, Sermons 341-400*, p. 405. <https://wesleyscholar.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Augustine-Sermons-341-400.pdf>

³ Augustine, p. 408.

⁴ Daniel J. Ott, “Matthew 35:31-46 – Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 2* (Kindle edition).

for forgiveness. In each of these encounters, Martin shares his strong faith with these people, recounting parables of Jesus and telling them of what he heard the voice say about his special guest.

At the end of the day, his special guest still has not arrived. As Martin once again reads his Bible, he sees vague forms in the shadows of his room and asks "Who is there?" In turn the man, the woman and child, and the old vendor and the boy step from the shadows and reveal themselves, each saying "It is I" before smiling and then vanishing. And as he turns again to the pages before him, he finds that he is reading the same Gospel passage we heard this morning: "I was hungry, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in."

"Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren even these least, ye did it unto me."

Jesus had indeed visited Martin that day – not in the way he expected, but rather as those simple, unknown men, women and children who lived around him on the margins of his world. Martin did not have much, but he had enough. He had the gifts God had given him. He stayed busy while waiting for Jesus to appear, working at his craft while caring for others. And he shared what he had with those invited into his home, joyfully and with an open heart.

Grace and love. Risk and reward. Giving and receiving. Think about these things. Ponder them in your heart, and knowing that the gifts of Christ are already yours ask what you will do to justify them?

Amen.