

Worship Resources / The New Normal / <https://youtu.be/pstgGwO1mjg>

25th Sunday of Pentecost, Year A,

22nd November, 2020

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

Prelude *For The Beauty of the Earth,*

by Conrad Kocher, Folliott Sandford Pierpoint,

played by church musician Annie Center

<https://youtu.be/4FzpzH1iAm8>

Intro / Call to Worship

O come let us worship and lift our hearts . . .Not because the world is good and last week was awesome, but because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the God of the whole Earth.

O come let us worship and raise our hands . . . Not because our lives are all sweetness and light, But because even those who walk in darkness can see a great light, the Bright and Morning Star

O come let us worship and bow down . . .Not because God gives us what we want, But because God gives us what we need –the holy child Jesus, God's Unspeakable Gift.

I'm glad to welcome you to online worship with Olympic View Community Church. We seek to welcome all of God's children to join us in bearing witness to the radically transforming power of God's love.

When we gather together at Olympic View, we like to start our service sharing greetings and the peace and shalom of Christ with each other. Our gospel lesson this morning focuses on how we care for and interact with each other. As we approach the Thanksgiving holiday this week, let's think of those we could care for and show kindness to, in thanksgiving and gratitude for all we have received.

Reflection Video *Will You Let Me Be Your Servant*

(The Servant Song), performed by Mutual Kumquat, used with permission

Invocation

God,

You call us to service; to be your eyes and ears, hands and voice in this, your world.

To open our eyes not only to the beauty and love which you create, but the injustice, hate and suffering that humankind generates.

To open our ears not only to the chattering of this coming week, but the searching, fears and questioning of all whom we shall meet.

To open our hands not only to those we choose our lives to share, but in welcome, love and fellowship to all who you draw near.

To open our mouths not only to speak platitudes and simple words, but the truths you lay upon our hearts. Your Word for this, your world.

You call us to service, to be your eyes and ears, hands and voice in this, your world.

This morning may your Spirit guide us to better understand and respond to your call, Amen.

We light a candle today to represent the Spirit burning within us, and among us, guiding our time together. (light candle) Amen.

In our reading from Ezekiel this week, we are reminded of the love and concern our Creator has for us, as well as the expectation that we share in that concern for others.

First Testament Reading CEV

Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24

The Lord God then said:

I will look for my sheep and take care of them myself,

just as a shepherd looks for lost sheep. My sheep have been lost since that dark and miserable day when they were scattered throughout the nations.^[a]

But I will rescue them

and bring them back from the foreign nations where they now live. I will be their shepherd and will let them graze on Israel's mountains and in the valleys and fertile fields.

They will be safe as they feed on grassy meadows and green hills. I promise to take care of them and keep them safe, to look for those that are lost and bring back the ones that wander off, to bandage those that are hurt and protect the ones that are weak. I will also slaughter **[b]** those that are fat and strong, because I always do right.

So I, the Lord God, will separate you strong sheep from the weak.

You strong ones have used your powerful horns to chase off those that are weak,

but I will rescue them and no longer let them be mistreated. I will separate the good from the bad.

After that, I will give you a shepherd from the family of my servant King David. All of you, both strong and weak, will have the same shepherd, and he will take good care of you.

He will be your leader, and I will be your God. I, the Lord, have spoken.

Scripture Video Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24 | *The Lord Is The Good Shepherd*

Lectionary bible reading

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZOK-SKj4RU>

A Time of Prayer

Today we come together as a community to share together our joys and concerns, and lift them to God in prayer. If you would like to share a specific request to be included in our communal prayer time, please leave a comment in the video below, or email myself at: vicarglenn@gmail.com, and I'll make sure to include that request in next week's service, as well as send a prayer chain email, if you would like.

Joys and Concerns

This morning we take joy in Matthew Schultz's promotion at work, and for his good health days, but also keep him in prayer that a solution can be found for his ongoing health concerns.

We are also thankful for those who serve the church tirelessly, resolving maintenance issues, and organizing Thanksgiving baskets during a pandemic to bring joy to those who might not otherwise have a good holiday.

We lift up all of us who are unable to be with family and friends this year, and seek to remember what is really important, the health and well-being of all.

Let's bring these concerns and others in our lives to God together in prayer.

Pastoral Prayer

Create a throne room for yourself here, O Christ, but let it be the empty seat beside the anxious the lonely chair next to the confused the vacant pew next to the hungry and reign, O Jesus, as sovereign over the forgotten

May your reign be a mockery to the world but good news to those who seek out truth and may we join them in the search finding you walking the streets or breaking bread or sitting by bedsides

May we find you in border areas on the edge of things crossing over with the foreigner

May we find you among children learning to finger paint as teachers to those who long to enjoy life again

May we find you with the worried silenced with nothing to say and space enough to keep it

May we find you on the wrong side of the tracks going where you should not and finding a place to lay your head among the lost

May we find you singing our songs of justice and peace and removing your crown to do so

May we find you with a word that lives in the hopes of the afraid and a comforting peace for those who are broken

May we find you laughing at the powerful unnerving what folk think so secure while welcoming those who have nothing into your throne room

O Jesus, reigning in the world with your upside down kingdom may we find the faith to stand with you sovereign of life and servant of all

In our gospel lesson this morning, we are reminded of the importance of the “least of these” among us. As hear these words from Matthew, let’s give some thought

as to who are those in need among us, and what we really think about our role in serving them.

Gospel Lesson Matthew 25:31-46 CEV

When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all of his angels, he will sit on his royal throne.

The people of all nations will be brought before him, and he will separate them, as shepherds separate their sheep from their goats.

He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, "My father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created.

When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me."

Then the ones who pleased the Lord will ask, "When did we give you something to eat or drink?

When did we welcome you as a stranger or give you clothes to wear or visit you while you were sick or in jail?"

The king will answer, "Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me."

Then the king will say to those on his left, "Get away from me! You are under God's curse. Go into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!

I was hungry, but you did not give me anything to eat, and I was thirsty, but you did not give me anything to drink.

I was a stranger, but you did not welcome me, and I was naked, but you did not give me any clothes to wear. I was sick and in jail, but you did not take care of me."

Then the people will ask, "Lord, when did we fail to help you when you were hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in jail?"

The king will say to them, "Whenever you failed to help any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you failed to do it for me."

Then Jesus said, “Those people will be punished forever. But the ones who pleased God will have eternal life.”

Scripture Video Matthew 25:31-46 *The Final Judgement*

Lectionary bible reading

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoOETu0FSdU>

Message – The New Normal

The least of these. A phrase I’m sure we’ve heard before, at least I hope it’s a concept we’re familiar with. But the question is, who really are the least of these, and who really stands among the sheep and goats? It might seem obvious, and we certainly have a traditional view that those who are the least of these are all those categories listed: the thirsty, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. Basically the downtrodden, the other. And that basic message is still very valid and appropriate. But let’s look a little deeper and who Jesus was directing this parable at.

There has been some debate over time about the translation of one little Greek phrase in this passage, and how that interpretation affects the greater meaning of the story. “Pante ta ethne” literally means “all the nations”, but many times in Matthew that phrase only connotes the Gentiles, or non-Jews. So depending on how we interpret that phrase can have a significant impact on whom this parable was directed to, and how we should apply it.

The traditional interpretation has been to take the phrase as inclusive and global in perspective. From that point of view, the implication is a much more universal application and the categories mentioned are broad mandates for how we are to encounter anybody experiencing hardship. But if we look at this passage focused just on the Gentiles, then Jesus’ message has a different slant. Focused just on Gentiles implies that they are being judged on how they treat others, particularly those who are followers of Jesus.

New Testament scholar Daniel J. Harrington points out that the interpretation of this passage as a judgment of Gentiles according to their reception of Jesus’ followers is often rejected because it leaves the passage “with little relevance for contemporary ethics...” What, though, could be more pertinent in our time than the question of the religious other? If we accept that this passage is directed at Gentiles, then the implication is that they are being judged for how they treat the religious “others” in their midst. They would have no idea that they were caring for the “Son of Man” in their midst. They would be judged solely on their ethical treatment of the “others” among them. Nevertheless, they “inherit the kingdom” as a reward for their ethical treatment of Christ’s followers, who to them would have been religious and ethnic outsiders. There’s no mention of them reluctantly “tolerating” the views of these new missionaries, or that there was any sort of

conversion to this new faith. The righteous simply cared for the “others,” the strangers who came among them. They would have known nothing of reward or punishment. They just did what was right. Following that interpretation then, the goats are judged harshly not due to a lack of faith, but as a result of their own moral failure in working, or not working with others.

So the question naturally arises: If the Gentiles, who knew nothing about the deep Jewish tradition of caring for strangers and knew nothing about Jesus’ message to love as God loves, are expected to know enough to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned, regardless of where they come from or what they believe, how much more is expected of those who are in the fold, who are taught to emulate that inclusion and love, who know what’s expected of us? And why don’t we always?

What is it that keeps us from seeing Christ always in the downtrodden among us? Some of these parables at the end of Matthew include some pretty scary judgement imagery and this week continues that theme. One might even say these parables are thematic. But again, to focus on the fear of ultimate judgment and eternal suffering is to miss the point.

Fear, now, as it was in first century Palestine, is the problem, not the solution. The Romans and Jewish elite used fear to keep people in line. The fear of divine wrath, the fear of real physical hardship under a brutal military occupation, the fear of loss of livelihood and security were all real threats in that time. And how much has really changed?

It seems to me we still labor under similar circumstances in this world. Sure the players have changed. Rome has a new face and flag today, but still dominates the world through military might. Religious authorities represent a somewhat different faith but the message is still the same, isn’t it? Repent or suffer the consequences. But the problem with a culture of fear is it leads to not adhering to the basic tenets that Jesus laid out as the kin-dom life free from such stress.

Fear causes people to fixate on the many things they have not done or cannot do. They wallow in guilt because they’re afraid to take that risk. They think things like, “I turn my head away when I encounter a homeless person. I’m wasteful with food when others are starving.” The guilt list goes on and on doesn’t it. When we obsess with the security of our own salvation, we truly miss the whole point the ministry of Jesus was trying to make.

What happens if we read this passage from a faith perspective instead of a fear perspective? Do we then see more the kin-dom at hand that we can empower and participate in? Instead of fear and damnation, do we see hope and possibilities? This passage is truly about kin-dom living here and now. It’s all about faith, putting our trust in God and stepping out in confidence, not holding back in fear and trepidation. It’s looking the homeless in the eye and acknowledging them. It’s picking up a sleeping bag on Black Friday and walking it right out to someone camped out down the street. It’s forming or

joining a prison ministry. It's living simply so you have the resources to help others. And it can be taking that leap of faith. Pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone, where the world tells us there's too much risk, while our God tells us mountains can be moved with sufficient faith alone.

Ours is a dynamic Deity always on the move. What was the tried and true work of the church yesterday may be moot and ineffective today. Who are the "least of these today?" What efforts are being made to alleviate their suffering, or more importantly, what efforts are being made to resolve the circumstances that made them "less than" in the first place. We need to be careful that we don't fall into the trap of "mission-trip mentality" where we consecrate poverty and oppression because Christ is mystically among the downtrodden and we seek to commune with Christ in the impoverished and mistreated person. We then will make the experience about us, and what we did to help, "I gave so little and gained so much." Our calling is to bring an end to the unjust mechanisms that led to the situation in the first place, not just provide temporary relief for today.

So how does that happen, changing the very way the world works? Well, first of all, it's giving the world a model to follow. When they look to the church, they should see people and resources that are always devoted to the "other," the stranger in our midst. They should be the guest of honor at our banquets, not the other way round. People should see a body that looks outward, not inward, forward, not backward. People of the present, the here and now. That's how you change things, you refuse to accept the status quo.

Imagine what could be if all the self-proclaimed Christians in this country flatly refused to accept hunger in the world, or poverty. What impact would that have, if we really focused here and now on the "least of these" without judgment. For too long now, Christianity has had tunnel vision to the end times, to the return of Christ. If I had a nickel for every time I've heard things like, "When will Jesus come again? Surely it must be soon, things can't get any worse," I wouldn't need a salary.

The problem with that line of thought is, Jesus is already here. We see him in the least of us. We see Jesus in the child going to bed hungry. We see Jesus in the stranger who is of a different ethnic group, someone who doesn't look like me. We see Jesus in the prisoner, provided we ever go to visit.

These sisters and brothers are not metaphors to be used as colorful examples. They are real people. The question is, are we real followers of a real Jesus? A real Jesus that shows up at our door, looking for help. A real Jesus who struggles just to get by, or struggles just to be able to live as who they are. How do we respond when we meet that Jesus?

There's the story of Martin of Tours who was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold and Martin gave what he had.

He took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?" And Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me"

We live in a world that is struggling with fear and desperation. We fear disease, we fear political change, we want to return to "normal." But was "normal" such a great thing? Perhaps we need to think how "normal" worked for the Jesus in the "others" around us, in the "least of these in our world."

I hope and pray we as individuals, and more importantly as a community of faith, find more ways to be more like Martin. As servants of the living God, we are called to a different walk than what the world presents to us as "normal", and higher expectations as such. Though rather than offering our coat to a stranger, maybe the better path would be to make sure all had coats to begin with, to redefine what the "normal" we go back to should be. A pipe dream, or a potential reality? That choice is ours. Amen.

Call to Serve.

As we continue to seek to be a place of compassion and support to our community, we ask that you give prayerful consideration as to how you may support our efforts. If you would like to make a donation, gifts can still be mailed to our church office, or online donations can be made through the link in the video description. Thanks again for all your support, and may we continue to work together to keep being a place of ministry that seeks to promote the growth of God's shalom around us. This morning, as Annie shares the following song, let's give some thought as to what we can do as individuals, and as the body of Christ in this world, to redefine what "normal" should be from God's perspective.

A Time for Reflection

Reflection on the Word Video

10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)

Words and Music by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin,
arranged by Carol Tornquist,
played by church musician Annie Center,
used and reported under CCLI Streaming License 20261246

<https://youtu.be/kV88lMOEsJs>

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

Loving and merciful One, we thank you for the community in which you have placed us, for the brothers and sisters with whom we walk this pilgrim journey.

Yet, we confess that we fail to love as you love. We push aside those whom we believe are the least in your Kingdom. We fail to see your Kingdom in parables because we fail to see your Kingdom in each other. Form in us a new vision of community in which there is neither East nor West, neither South nor North.

We pray for the sake of your Kingdom that both is and is not yet.
Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

May God, who comes to us in the things of this world, bless your eyes and be in your seeing.

May Christ, who looks upon you with deepest love, bless your eyes and widen your gaze.

May the Spirit, who perceives what is and what may yet be, bless your eyes and sharpen your vision.

May the Sacred Three bless your eyes and cause you to see.

As we extinguish this candle, carry its divine spark into your lives this week, sharing God's love and light with all you encounter. Amen.

Postlude *My Tribute*, by Andrae Crouch

performed by church musician Annie Center,

used and reported under CCLI Streaming License 20261246

<https://youtu.be/pEuSYGqeQ-0>