

**Pastor Joel presented this sermon on Reign of Christ Sunday, November 20, 2011. It is entitled, “For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food” based on the gospel lesson from Matthew 25:31-46 and from the Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel 34:11-16.**

Today, the last day of the Christian liturgical year, we celebrate the reign of Christ. That is, we celebrate our acceptance of Christ Jesus, of his teachings, of the real presence of his Spirit, of his incarnation of God’s enduring love. Today we celebrate our belief that in some unique and mysterious way, Christ holds some kind of authority, some kind of power and dominion, not only in our lives but within the reality of our universe, such that we may consider him Sovereign of the Universe. Today, we confess our belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ and his God, our God, and to the way of life to which he calls us.

In our readings today, we are given two primary images of authority. The shepherd and the king. In Ezekiel we have God who takes on the role of shepherd, caring for his sheep, the people of Israel. God becomes their shepherd because those who had been “shepherding” the flock, had failed and so God steps in. But God promises to appoint a new shepherd, “*my servant David*” or one in the line of David, who will feed them and be their shepherd.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus refers to himself as “*the Son of Man*”, a reference from the Old Testament apocalyptic book of Daniel. He is portrayed as a king, sitting “*on the throne of his glory*.” But he takes action like a shepherd would as he separates the sheep from the goats.

So, we have a shepherd who is a king and a king who is a shepherd. Both, of course, are simply images that describe and inform our understanding of who both God and Jesus are. But they are rich images, used throughout both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

In the Ezekiel passage for today, we have this wonderful image of the shepherd. The shepherd is one who “seeks out” the sheep, who “rescues” them from the places they have been scattered, who will “bring them” together, that is, unite them in a land of their own. The shepherd “feeds” the sheep on the mountains, by the rivers, on “good pasture”, on “rich pasture” and they will lie down in the grazing lands, the “good” grazing lands. God, as the shepherd, will “seek the lost” will “bring back the strayed” and will “bind up the injured”, and will “strengthen the weak.” This is an idealistic shepherd image. This is one who truly cares about the sheep. It is such a gentle and comforting image, much like

we picture the image of the shepherd in the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm.

But the image of the shepherd changes dramatically, if even subtly, when the sentence continues, “*but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.*” And it then continues, “*Therefore, thus . . . says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.*”

There is a move here from the pastoral to the prophetic, from comfort to judgment. And it is clear who it is here who is being judged. It is the “fat and the strong” sheep, those that have pushed and bullied their way, taking as much of the good pasture for themselves, scattering the weak and lean sheep from the places God, the shepherd had brought them to.

It is hard for me to read this right now without making a connection with the world in which we live. If Ezekiel was writing this today, we can imagine, can’t we, that many of the political pundits would be accusing him of promoting “class warfare” or suggesting that he is unfairly blaming the rich and powerful for all the problems we are facing.

But don’t his words strike a chord with us in our own day? With us who live in a land where since 1982, the share of America’s income held by the top 1 percent of the population has more than doubled? Where the top 1% of Americans holds 39% of the nation’s wealth and takes in 25% of its annual income? Or where the top 10% hold more than 70% of the wealth and the bottom 50% hold only 2% of the wealth? (*Christian Century magazine, Nov. 15, 2011, p.22*)

I don’t know that much about the “OCCUPY WALL STREET” movement, but I know that it has touched a nerve within our society, and I have to admire those who are willing to stand up against what they see as an unfair and unbalanced disbursement of the nation’s, even the world’s, wealth and power, and who are demanding a more equitable and truly democratic social structure.

But if we look again at the message of Ezekiel and of Matthew's parable of the "Great Judgement", it is not necessarily our wealth or position or amount of power and influence which carries us into God's judgement. It is what we do with it that matters.

The beauty of Jesus' parable here is how that is expressed so well! Here, the Son of Man divides the people of the nations. And could it be any clearer? Those that are blessed, are those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick and visited the imprisoned.

And they did it, not because they were going to get something out of it. Not because they were getting paid to do it or because it would increase the bottom line. They didn't do it because they thought it was going to get them into heaven or because it would make them a better person. They did it because they loved. Because they saw a person in need and responded with whatever resources they had. That's why they were blessed. And they learned that in so doing, as they cared for those in need around them, they were also caring for the Sovereign of the Universe, just by simply doing what they thought was the right thing to do.

The question for us in our day must be, what will we do, how will we work, to bring hope to the hopeless and help to those in need and whether or not we will be willing to demand a change in the social structure so that it provides a more balanced and equitable distribution of our nation's wealth to all our nation's people.

Recently, the United Church of Christ, our denomination, decided to do something. They made a challenge to all our churches. They wanted to do a number of things to raise awareness of and to combat hunger in our midst. The project was called "MISSION 1: ONE UNITED CHURCH." It was to take place during the first 11 days of November and it had 3 goals. 1) To collect more than 1 million items of healthy food for food banks and outreach services, 2) To make an extra push to collect online contributions of more than \$111,111 for Neighbors in Need food-related ministries throughout the U.S. and another \$111,111 for East Africa famine-related ministries, and 3) To offer more than 11,111 letters to Congress asking for reform of U.S. foreign assistance in a way that more effectively benefits hungry and poor people worldwide.

To date, they have surpassed their goal and have collected 1,392,085 items of food; are just

short of the goals for monetary donations, having received \$109,283 for U.S. food-related ministries and \$105, 588 for East African ministries; and have reported 36,804 letters written to Congress. That's 25,693 beyond their goal!

The United Church of Christ, our church, and some of you may have been part of this, has come together, has united as one to work together to help the hungry and poor in our midst. Look at all that our own young people and all of you have done! Look at all that you have brought forward today to help feed the hungry right here in Waldo County. And I am certain that we have not done this because we are going to get rich by doing it, or that we are going to gain in any way, or that we are hoping for God's blessing or for a better place in heaven for doing this. We are doing it because we love. And I firmly believe that we are doing it because of the presence and guidance of God's Holy Spirit in our midst, our Sovereign Christ, shepherding us along this way.

Jesus' parable of the Great Judgement encourages us to see him in those around us, especially in the "least" among us, those in need, those who are having a tough time with life, those who just need a little help to get back on their feet, or those who need some intense help to get out of a life that is harmful and hurtful to them and their families. We are called to see the Christ in each other's eyes, to reach out in love, and to be Christ for each other.

So, as we prepare to gather with family and friends for Thanksgiving, may we especially remember those throughout our nation and our world who are in need, the "least of these" as Jesus called them. I thank you for your gifts this day, and pray that we may all continue to serve and celebrate our Lord and God who reigns over us and all creation with grace and love, justice and compassion and truth. Amen.