

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
November 20, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme-Surprises in Heaven

Psalm 100, Ezekiel 34:11- 16, 20-24, Ephesians 1: 15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

This is a Sunday of thanksgiving for three reasons. We thank God that he made Christ the King over all creation. We are thankful that Christ the King promises to return someday. It is also the Sunday before our national holiday of Thanksgiving.

Today's scriptures build on the themes of joyful thanksgiving and God being the ruler over all creation. Our call to worship from Psalm 100 gives us a good foundation. "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the LORD is God. It is God that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." Isn't it wonderful to know to whom we belong and who looks after us. Furthermore, the Psalmist proclaims that ... "the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations." No wonder we can "Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and God's courts with praise, give thanks to him, and bless God's name."

It is good for us to take the time to bask in the joy and thanksgiving for such a ruler as the Lord our God is to us. Yet, we cannot stay here and keep these blessing to ourselves. In the passage from Matthew, Jesus graphically describes what we are to be doing with these blessings as we await his sudden return and the Day of Judgment. We are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those in prison. This is not all that we are to do, but it is a sampling of the compassion we are to show to our fellow human beings who are in need. These are a few of the ways we can be God's people of joy and thanksgiving in response to God's shepherding presence, and to his blessings of steadfast love and faithfulness. This is what Jesus wants us to be doing now and when he returns.

Our congregation responds to this call and these needs in many ways. When all of our mission outreach is totaled up, we give over \$80,000 a year to local, presbytery, General Assembly, and World missions. Today, we will take up the Presbyterian Woman's Thank Offering. Within the next week, our deacons will ask us to reach out with Christmas gifts to the less fortunate in our community. From November 27-December 4 we will be hosting homeless families through Family Promise. Also, from the middle of December until the end of the year, the Mission Ministry will be asking us to help retired church workers and minority colleges through the Christmas Joy Offering. Even with all this, more hands-on help is needed with persons who are hungry, homeless, helpless and lonely.

It is vital to remember that in all we do to help others, we do not do it to earn credit with God. We cannot earn credit with God. We are saved by grace alone in Jesus Christ. This grace is also a major reason we are thankful. It is a thankfulness expressed not just with emotions but in down to earth actions or works God created us to do in Christ Jesus. "A United Methodist Bishop named Roy Nichols wrote that he grew up in a kind of charismatic black church where there was a lot of enthusiasm, a

lot of shouting and jumping. Nichols said that his mother told him once, 'It isn't so much how high you jump but what you do when you come down.'" When Jesus returns, he will find our feet planted firmly on the ground doing his work in his name in **response to his grace**. Right? Ray Balcomb Best Sermons 4, pgs 41-47

All this brings us back to the fact that this is Christ the King Sunday, which reminds us that Christ will return and decide on who has been granted everlasting life. Christ will return as the victorious power over all of creation as Paul writes in Ephesians. "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

The Risen Christ seated on the throne at God's right hand leads us into the drama of his actual return as described in Matthew. The Son of Man will come in his glory, and will sit on the throne of his glory. "All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people/ one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left." Some scholars believe that Jesus intended this judgment drama to refer to all peoples, religions and nations. Others say that this drama was only for those Gentiles who do not believe in Jesus Christ,/ because there are scriptures that tell us that Jews and Christians will be judged separately from the pagan Gentiles. Either way, Jesus is telling us that there will be some surprises in heaven on judgment day for all people.

In the drama, some people were surprised when they were told by Christ to **come to heaven** because they had shown compassion to others in need. They did not realize they had done anything special, nor were they seeking favor with God in their actions. They may not have had any definable belief in God. They simply practiced acts of compassion where they demonstrated that they loved the Lord their God with all their hearts, minds and souls and their neighbors as themselves. From the Christian viewpoint this means that they have been influenced by the Holy Spirit, God's grace and have been obedient to God in Jesus Christ as Lord without knowing it.

Other people were shocked when they were left out of heaven, because they failed to show compassion to other human beings despite their stated belief in God. They did not practice their confession of faith. This judgment was also aimed at some of Scribes and Pharisees who practiced the law, but not the love and compassion of God behind it. The bottom line for Jesus is that when we show compassion to another human being, we show it to him. When we don't, we have neglected him. Yes, Jesus warns us that there will be surprises in heaven on judgment day.

Such heavenly surprises occur on earth today, especially when we make our own judgments on people. And what if the roles are reversed? What if we are the one in need and Jesus comes to us in a person we least expect him to work through? There is a story to this affect in Chicken Soup For the Soul, Stories of Faith pg. 64. It is titled: "You Got Another One Joey," by Bob Perks.

"I couldn't believe it. Of all the times for this to happen-a flat tire! But when is a good time? Not when you are wearing a suit and you have been traveling for nearly

five hours, and, added to this bleak picture, nightfall is approaching. Wait! Did I mention I was on a country road? There was only one thing to do. Call the local automobile association. Yeah, right. The cell phone I bought, for security and protection from moments like these, wasn't in range to call anyone. 'No service,' it said. No kidding! I sat for a few minutes moaning and complaining. Then I began emptying my trunk so I could get at the tire and tools needed to get the job done. I carry a large, plastic container filled with what I call 'just-in-case stuff.' When I am training or speaking, I love to have props with me. I hate leaving anything home so I bring everything... just in case. Cars buzzed by me. A few beeped sarcastically. It was as if the horns were saying, 'Ha, ha.' Darkness began to settle in, and it became more difficult to see. Thank goodness it was the tire on the passenger's side, away from the traffic-but that only made it more impossible to benefit from the headlights of passing cars."

"Suddenly, a car pulled off the road behind me. In the blinding light, I saw a male figure approaching me. 'Hey, do you need any help?' he said. "Well, it certainly isn't easy doing this with a white dress shirt and suit on," I replied sarcastically. Then he stepped into the light. I was literally frightened. This young guy was dressed in black. Nearly everything imaginable was pierced and tattooed. His hair was cropped and poorly cut, and he wore leather bracelets with spikes on each wrist. 'How about I give you a hand?' he said. 'Well, I don't know... I think I can...,' I said. 'Come on, it will only take me a few minutes,' he replied.' He took right over. While I watched him, I happened to look back at his car and noticed, for the first time, someone sitting in the passenger seat. That concerned me. I suddenly felt outnumbered. Thoughts of carjackings and robberies flashed through my mind. I really just wanted to get this over and survive the ordeal."

"Then, without warning, it began to pour. The night sky had hidden the approaching clouds. It hit like a waterfall and made it impossible to finish changing the tire. 'Look, my friend, I said to the man, just stop what you're doing. I appreciate all your help. You'd better get going. I'll finish after the rain stops.' 'Let me help you put your stuff back in the trunk. It will get ruined,' he insisted. 'Then get in my car. We'll wait with you.' 'No, really, I'll take care of everything,' I said. 'You can't get in your car with the jack up like that. It will fall. Come on. Get in!' He grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the car. Crack! Boom! Lightning and thunder roared like a freight train. I jumped into his car. Oh, God, protect me, I prayed to myself."

"Wet and tired, I settled into the back seat. Suddenly, a kindly, frail voice came from the front seat. 'Are you all right?' a petite older woman asked as she turned around to face me. 'Yes, I am,' I replied, greatly relieved at seeing the old woman there. I suspected she was his mom. 'My name is Beatrice, and this is my neighbor, Joey,' she said. 'He insisted on stopping when he saw you struggling with the tire.' 'I am grateful for his help,' I responded. 'Me, too,' Beatrice laughed. 'Joey takes me to visit my husband. We had to place him in a nursing home, and it's about thirty minutes away from my residence. So, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Joey and I have a date.' With a childish grin she looked at Joey."

"Joey's whimsical remark, 'We're the remake of *The Odd Couple*,' gave us all a good

laugh. I replied, 'Joey, that's incredible what you do for her. I would never have guessed, well, you know...' I stumbled with the words. 'I know. People who look like me don't do nice things,' he said. I was silent. I really felt uncomfortable. I never judge people by the way they dress, and I was angry with myself for being so foolish. 'Joey is a great kid. I'm not the only one he helps-he's also a volunteer at our church. He also works with the kids in the learning center at the low-income housing unit in our town,' Beatrice added. 'I'm a tutor,' Joey said modestly as he stared at my car."

'I reflected for a few moments on what Joey said. He was right. What he wore on the outside was a reflection of the world as he saw it. What he wore on the inside was the spirit of giving, caring and loving the world from his point of view. When the rain stopped, Joey and I changed the tire. I tried to offer him money, and he refused. As we shook hands, I began to apologize for my stupidity. He said, 'I experience that same reaction all the time. I actually thought about changing the way I look, but then I saw this as an opportunity to make a point. So I'll leave you with the same question that I ask everyone who takes time to know me. If Jesus returned tomorrow and walked among us again, would you recognize him by what he wore or by what he did?' Joey walked back to his car. As they drove off, Beatrice was smiling and waving as she began to laugh again. I could almost hear her saying, 'You got another one, Joey. You got another one.'"

So, on this Christ the King Sunday, how do you and I stand before the King? Have we "been gotten" in the most positive way by his grace and love as Bob Perks was by Joey? I hope so. In response to God's grace and love, have we generously shared it in word and deed with the "least of these" as Joey did to Bob Perks? I pray we have so that on the day of Christ the King's return we will all hear him say to us: "Come enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and God's courts with praise, give thanks to God, and bless God's name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. Psalm 100