

Today is the Last Sunday After Pentecost. On this day, we celebrate the promise that Jesus Christ, the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe, by whom and for whom all things were created, will ultimately reign.

Many liturgical churches also celebrate this as The Feast of Christ the King. In our continuing efforts to make our language more gender inclusive, the term Reign of Christ is gaining acceptance. I really prefer Reign of Christ because the emphasis is on what Christ is *doing* throughout the cosmos and throughout eternity – *reigning!*

Today's Gospel, Matthew 25:31-46, is often referred to as *The Parable of the Last Judgment*. It speaks of the accountability all people will have when the reigning Christ sits upon his throne at the time when cosmos reaches its completion. For ten years as Rector of Galveston's Trinity Church I stood in a pulpit beneath a 30-foot tall Tiffany window based upon the theme of The Last Judgment. Christ is depicted as seated upon his throne surrounded by angels and children and women and men. The inscription on the bottom of the window is Matthew 25:40: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> you did it to me."

That window was placed there in 1904 by Magnolia Sealy in memory of her husband George Sealy, President of the Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe Railroad, for whom the town of Sealy, Texas was named. Since that time, every Sunday and every time that congregation gathers for worship, it is reminded that the hallmark of Christian discipleship is how we live our lives under the leadership of Jesus Christ the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe.

The word "orthodox" means "right worship" not "right belief." Today's gospel reading says to us that the right worship of Christ the King exalts the way we treat people above the details of our belief system. I don't mean to suggest that what we believe does not matter. But I do mean to suggest that we are judged on the basis of how what we believe translates into how we treat others. This parable is a stunning example of that point of view.

I recall an encounter I had with a radically evangelical fundamentalist during my college years. He and I were about the same age. He was a member of Campus Crusade for Christ and had chosen me as the target of his mission. We talked about our differing theological views and never found much common ground. It turned out to be

a debate, not a conversation. At the end of our debate, he referred to this passage of scripture and said as he parted, “I hope you’ll see the light and end up in heaven with me after the great judgment.”

If you’ll read the passage carefully, you’ll see that the basis of our accountability is not on having the right doctrine. When we stand before Christ it is always about how we have expressed the faith we profess - how we have ministered to Christ through our service to the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, the prisoners, the marginalized and vulnerable people we encounter in our journey of faith. Faith in Christ is a challenge to expand our comfort zones and reach out beyond them to such as these in ways that our faith and our good works are in alignment.

A hungry man was walking down the street in a village of medieval Turkey. He had only a piece of bread in his hand. He came to a restaurant where some meatballs were being grilled. The cooking meat was so near and the smell so delicious the man held his piece of bread over the meat to capture some of the smell. As he started to eat the bread, the angry restaurant owner seized him and took him away to see a judge.

The owner protested, “This man was stealing the smell of my meat without asking permission. I want you to make him pay me for it.” The judge thought for a moment, then held up his purse in front of the owner and shook it. “What are you doing that for?” asked the restaurant owner? The judge replied, “I am paying you. The sound of money is fair payment for the smell of food.”

The challenge when we dealing with the kind of people described by Jesus in this passage is to make sure that what we are sharing with them is real. We must make sure that our care is expressed in ways that are tangible and life changing.

Each Sunday, as we affirm our faith, we say that we believe “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” One might say that the scriptural basis for that statement of faith is Matthew 25:31-46. And, if so, it seems clear to me that the issue is not one where we argue to present our case or even one where we prepare to be judged. Rather, it is one we live. We are judged not by our membership in a church but rather what we do for others, not by what we know but what we have shared. Both the sheep and goats will be judged not by their creeds but by their deeds.