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Matthew 25:31-46

THE ROYAL TREATMENT

I've been watching recently the new season of the Netflix series *The Crown*, a fictionalized drama about the life and reign of the current Queen Elizabeth of the United Kingdom. Part of what fascinates the viewers about this drama is what it reveals about the lavish lives of the royal family—their ornate and opulent palaces, their beautiful clothing, the pageantry and privilege that accompany these royal people wherever they go. Such is the world royal people have inhabited throughout history. Royalty are not treated like everyone else. And they don't live like everyone else. Royalty have always been afforded special treatment. That's what people in Jesus' day expected of royalty and of emperors. And that is what we expect today even of presidents and prime ministers. People in power are given special treatment.

So when Jesus starts to tell the parable from our reading today, those listening to him would have this expectation. And the story starts off as they expected. Jesus tells how the Son of Humanity will come as a king and will be seated on a throne in glory. And he will be surrounded by angels. So far, this scene of great pageantry and glory matched his listener's expectations for a story about royalty.

And then the nations gather before this king for judgment. Jesus' listeners would have understood that this story was going to be about the Day of Judgment. And they had expectations about what the Day of Judgment would look like as well. People in Jesus' day believed that on the Day of God's ultimate Judgment, people would be separated by how holy

they had been in their lives. Did they go to worship, did they pray, did they fast, did they observe the commandments? If so, they were considered righteous.

But not everyone would be considered righteous. Some people would be judged as unholy and as sinners. And everyone in society knew who those people were. The poor, the sick, people in prison--these were the kind of people who received societal judgment because it was believed that the suffering such people endured was a sign of God's judgment. We today also have our judgments about who is a "good" person and who is not. People in prison—not considered good people. People who are poor—if we are honest, they receive our judgment. Parents who cross international borders with their children in a desperate attempt to flee their harsh realities—they are judged as bad parents and even bad people. People on public assistance—judged as scammers and lazy. People who are addicted to drugs—judged as weak, undisciplined, and lacking self-control.

So in Jesus' parable we have this royal person, this monarch who is Jesus himself, and it is the Day of Judgment, the day for sorting out the good from the bad. But what happens next in Jesus' story shatters all expectations the people had for royalty and for their understanding of God's judgment. The king blesses one group of people saying, "I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison, and you took care of me." But the other group receives the king's judgment because the king says, "I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison, and you did not take care of me."

Now there are two radical components to this story. The first radical component is the shift in the direction of the king's judgment. In contrast to everyone's expectations, God's judgment is not centered on moral behavior—on living in an upright way, and following all the rules, and paying your taxes, and going to church, and getting a good job, and being faithful to

your spouse, and working hard at your job—all of which are very good things for sure. But according to our story today, God’s judgment is not centered on moral behavior but rather on the giving or withholding of mercy. The people in this story are judged based on the giving or the withholding of mercy and compassion toward the very people society typically judges. The people Jesus calls “the least of these.”

The second radical component to this parable lies with whom the king, this royal figure, identifies. Notice the king does not just praise the one group for showing mercy to the least members of society. Jesus could have told the story that way, telling the one group, “good for you, you cared for the sick and the poor and the stranger.” Instead the king says, “*I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was in prison, I was naked, I was a stranger, and you cared for me.*” This royal person in power, sitting on the throne in glory, surrounded by heavenly angels, this royal person identifies himself as one of the very people society despised and rejected. “I am that person,” Jesus is telling us in this parable. I am the undocumented migrant dying of thirst in the hot desert. I am the welfare mom living in substandard housing. I am the addict on the street corner. I am the unemployed laborer who can’t afford health insurance for my family. I am the LGBTQ person kicked out of the house by their parents. I am that person.

Today is the Sunday designated by the Christian Church as “Christ the King Sunday.” Today we focus on Christ as our sovereign leader. Some Christian churches will focus on a kind of triumphalism of Christ, celebrating him as the Victor, who comes in power and might and majesty, the ruler of all nations. But we learn something very essential in the parable for today about the nature of the royal figure we worship. Christ doesn’t want us to give *him* the royal treatment—so much as Christ wants us to extend the royal treatment to everyone else, especially to those people who society has little use for. Today’s scripture teaches us that Christ the King

comes to us disguised as the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the forgotten, the imprisoned, the rejected.

The parable's message is not only aimed at us as individuals but toward us as communities of people. Remember that in the parable, it was the *nations* who gathered before the throne for judgment. According to this parable, a nation shall be judged not by its military might, its cultural traditions or institutions, its charismatic leaders, or even its noble sentiments put down in its constitution. Rather, a nation shall be judged by how it cares for the weakest members of its society. Like those thousands of people waiting for government relief in the midst of a pandemic.

Jesus was not sentimentalizing the poor, the sick, the stranger, the folks in prison. They aren't necessarily *better* people or more moral people than others. But they are those who stand in need. The people judged in the parable had not actively done harm to the weak or disadvantaged. But they judged for their failure to act. They are judged for doing nothing to help. They did not extend mercy. They did not act with compassion. And they did not treat the least in society as the royal people of God.