



CHRIST IN THEIR EYES

November 26, 2017, Christ the King

Ezekiel 34:15–16, 20–22; Matthew 25:31–40

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Dear Lord, Heavenly Father, help us to see you in the eyes of the other. Help us to live compassionately, bringing hope, love and joy to all those whom we encounter. Be with us as you speak to us now. And be with us, as we take this love out into the world. In your wonderful Son, Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Thanksgiving is a time when most of us are thankful for the many blessings we have in our lives. For many, it is a holiday that joyfully, as well as sorrowfully, brings family and friends together who we haven't seen in a long time.

Growing up in Westfield, New Jersey, we always looked forward to the night before Thanksgiving because it was one of the most social nights of the year. When we were younger there would be bonfires, hot chocolate and football games. And as we got older, the night before Thanksgiving became the biggest night of the year for when everyone rushed home from college, or post-college, to come "home" and be with family and friends. It was always a night full of dinners, parties, gatherings and all other sorts of social outings including a tradition of late night bowling that developed over the years.

And then, after what always inevitably became a very late night out, we would get in the car early on Thanksgiving morning and my dad would drive us out to Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, to visit my mother's very large family. Which really meant that my dad would drive most of the morning while my brother and I slept. Then as we entered the city of Harrisburg my mom would wake us up and we would try to wipe the fog out of our brains.



We would arrive at my Aunt Pat and Uncle Keith's house and say hello to everyone before early "dinner," which was nearly impossible. To put this into perspective for you, my grandma had twelve siblings. So at my Aunt's there would be about four different dinner tables, two attached that went from the dining room into the kitchen, another in the formal living room, and still another in the TV room. And of course, since I was the youngest of an entire generation, as I am sure you could've imagined, I never graduated from the table that was in the TV room.

But that's only the beginning, what really mattered most was that every Thanksgiving, just before we would sit down for dinner at those tables full of family, fellowship, and communion, we would gather in one of the larger rooms and my uncle Keith would say how much we all had to be thankful for. Then he would intentionally call upon a couple of us to recap some of the good things that had happened that year in the lives of those of us gathered.

Oftentimes my uncle mentioned my name because when I was eleven I had open-heart surgery due to a hole in my heart the size of a quarter between the top two chambers, and I had awoken from a very successful surgery on Thanksgiving Day back in 1989. For this, we will always be thankful and grateful. And for this, on Thanksgiving Day I will always remember that I am a child of God no matter how old I get.

So we would all be thankful, and we would be sad, and we would thank God for all of it. Then Uncle Keith would say a prayer and we would all eat to our heart's content. And I mean EAT. One of the nuclear families in our extended family has the last name Hopper, and these people are huge. I mean giants! To give you an idea, the oldest son was something like 6'10". He literally had to duck through any doorway. Then the middle child, the daughter, was at least 6'7", and the "little brother" was just a little above her. These cousins ate three plates each before the buttered rolls even made it to the little kids.



This was Thanksgiving. These memories are Thanksgiving and things to be thankful for. These forms of table fellowship – communion, community and thankfulness – are the types of things, and ways to act, that Christ was teaching us to live. Family, friends, time off, and time away. Bread being broken together like the disciples had the opportunity to do with Christ the night before he died.

And because we are all thankful for our own stories, journeys and Thanksgivings we need to share that thankfulness with others. We need to be the hands and feet of Christ and to take that thankfulness from our table and homes out into the world and spread it with others.

In today's first reading from Ezekiel, we are the ones being fed "with good pasture" and we are the ones who need to share that good pasture with others. Christ will be, and is, our shepherd, and by Him we are to "seek the lost, and bring back the strayed, to bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak," for He does that for us and calls us to do that for others.

We are called not to use our power or might to push others with "flank and shoulder, or butt at all those with less power than ourselves with our horns," but rather be the people who help those with less power. We are called to bind up the broken hearted, we are called to feed the hungry, and give water to those who are thirsty. One way for us to be thankful for all the food we have is to volunteer somewhere like the New York Common Pantry. To offer our time, talents and resources to help get those with less access to food some good, healthy and hearty food.

Additionally, there are so many people who live in this world who don't have safe drinking water, while we live in a place where people are free to shower as long as they want and sip water from our designer water bottles to our heart's content, without even thinking about how lucky and fortunate we are. There are people all over the world who walk miles and miles for water, while here we can simply turn on a tap, or if we don't like that, we can have bottles of water from melting glaciers



in Fiji delivered to our doorstep free of charge. How can we remember to be thankful for what all we have in a way that offers water to those in need?

And when Jesus said to welcome the stranger, He was calling all of us to be people of radical hospitality. Well, what might that look like for each of us sitting here? When Christ said this, He was literally telling His followers to open up their homes and let the travelers who had no safe or warm place to stay, to come in and sleep in their homes. When's the last time any of us welcomed a stranger into our home? It's not safe, we know... but... when? And if not us, then who?

Perhaps we should start talking about baby steps. How do we radically welcome someone here, who is new to this church, into Christ's home, right here, and right now? What do we as a church, as a congregation, as the body of Christ, do to welcome people in this Holy Space? Do we greet them? Do we go out of our way to extend our hands and offer our names? Or do we come and go as quickly as we can?

So many of our church members have great stories of being welcomed into the fold here, so let's think of ways, and do things, that can continue in that manner. That can create more of those stories. Let's help shepherd people, or rather sheep, into Christ's fold right here and right now on the corner of 91st and Park.

Jesus also said that when He was naked we gave Him clothing and that when He was sick we took care of Him and that when He was in prison we visited Him. But when did we do this, Jesus? And He said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Often when the youth do Wednesday Night Dinner Program down in Watson Hall, we read Mathew 25. For those of you who don't know this, Wednesday Night Dinner Program is a time when a group of middle schoolers, high schoolers, and some Brick Church adults gather to cook a meal. And by meal, I mean pull out all the stops. We make and serve a starter or two, cook and plate a main course with a side or two, and finally serve a delicious dessert, like brownie á la mode or freshly



baked chocolate chip cookies. But we aren't doing all this for ourselves. Rather we are doing it for a group of 10 to 15 guests who come up from the Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter.

These guests are people who were previously homeless. Some of them have had drug addictions, were alcoholics, or just plain fell on hard times. And some have a psychological or physical difference that has made it hard to live on their own in this world. Whatever the case may be, these are some of the hungry and thirsty Christ was talking about. These are some of the strangers Christ has called us all to welcome in.

And so when we read Mathew 25 together before the guests come we are reminded to look for Christ in each and every one of our guests. To look them in the eye and to see Christ in their eyes. To give them a big smile and a great night out from a home that can be a dark, lonely and sad place. To look them in the eye and treat them as if they were Jesus Christ Himself while letting Christ's light shine out through each one of us. The most important part of those nights is sitting and spending time with our guests but often times the most powerful part of the night is at the very end. After everything is cleaned up and put away we stop and we read John 15:5 which says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

After we read the verse and talk about what it means we pass a plastic piece of fruit around the circle and each of us talks about when we saw God at work that evening. Sometimes it's in the smile of a guest, sometimes it's the miraculous fact that the food turned out to be delicious or that it got out of the oven on time, and others it is in one particular person's kind actions or words. It's an evening that reminds us to keep a look out for Christ in the eyes of our guests as well as in the eyes of the stranger out on the street corner.

One of the lectionary texts that didn't get read today but that so beautifully fits comes from Ephesians. In it Paul says, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you



come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

My mom Beverly taught my family something about having the eyes of our hearts enlightened in regards to radical hospitality when I was younger. Her nephew, my cousin, moved to the city to be a doctor many years ago. And while being a young, up-and-coming doctor, he didn't really have time to head all the way home to West Virginia for Thanksgiving. My mom started to invite him to our home in New Jersey for Thanksgiving Dinner because it was only a brief train ride away and he was family and we'd love to spend time with him.

Then, after a year or two, she noticed that sometimes he would be hesitant to come and that on other occasions when he did come he always came alone. So she started thinking about ways she could make him feel more welcome. And as she thought, she tried to figure out new ways to invite him “and a guest” to her home. To encourage him to bring whomever he wanted to for Thanksgiving.

You see, Beverly believed that her nephew was gay, even though he wasn't out of the closet as far as we were aware, and she wanted to let him know that we loved him no matter what. And that he and whomever he so loved was welcome to our Thanksgiving table, welcome to our home, and welcome to our family and our fold. And after time he began to bring a guest and both of them felt welcome, and both of them brought with them laughter and joy and love into our home. To many New Yorkers this might not seem like a big deal, but to someone who is gay and is from West Virginia this can be a huge deal. And so, if it's not such a big deal to a New Yorker, then what are we doing for others that is a big deal in the eyes of Christ?

How is our church, or are our homes and families, welcome to those who may be timid or scared or felt left out of the fold or are sitting on the side lines? Who in our lives and in the world around us is in need of being welcomed in from the cold,



lonely, and oftentimes dangerous world? And what are we doing to go out of our way to welcome them?

As we look back on, and give thanks for, our Thanksgiving feasts and activities from this past Thursday, let's remember those who we were with as if we could see Christ in each of their eyes. In a similar way, let's go out into the world and lift up the weak, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothes to the naked, take care of the sick, and visit with prisoners. And while we do each of these things, letting Christ shine through each of us and our actions, let's all remember to look for, and see, Christ in the eyes of the people we help and encounter.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.