

**Sermon – Christ the King Sunday/Thanksgiving Sunday**  
**November 20, 2011**  
**Text: Matthew 25:31-46 (from THE MESSAGE)**  
**Rev. Rex Piercy**

Well, here we go again. It's confluence of the sacred and the secular, albeit with a twist. More than once during a calendar year, a Sunday's liturgy can run smack dab into the middle of some civic observance, as, for example, when Pentecost fell on Mother's Day a few years ago or when the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is a Sunday

Today it's Thanksgiving and the Reign of Christ Sunday. Now I will grant you that Thanksgiving, while it is a federal holiday, has its share of religious overtones, which is more than can be said of most of our civil observances. So it's not quite so much of a challenge to incorporate some Thanksgiving-esque themes into our service today. And since this congregation has not had a Thanksgiving Eve or even Thanksgiving Day morning worship tradition, as do so many of our United Church of Christ congregations, especially those of Puritan and Pilgrim heritage, I am

glad we do include hymns and anthems that sound of gratitude and thankfulness.

But in my mind, liturgically, this the Reign of Christ Sunday, the final Sunday in the church's year, because next week we begin a new year with the First Sunday of Advent.

The Reign of Christ Sunday brings the liturgical year to a close with themes and scripture passages that stress the reign of Christ and its implications. While I wish we had the time to appreciate all of the readings appointed for this day, we are concentrating our attention on the Gospel lesson. It is the third and final and most familiar parable which Jesus told during his last week in Jerusalem, which the writer Matthew recorded back to back in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel which bears his name.

Like the other two – the parable of the five wise and the five foolish bridesmaids and the parable of the talents – this parable sounds as a critique by Jesus of the blindness of those who should really know better who he was and what he was about. And while Jesus addressed this string of parables at the religious know-it-alls, he didn't exempt his own disciples from their stinging message either, which is why you and I need to sit up and take notice of them as well.

All of these parables, and maybe especially this one, need to be heard as a lesson on how to live in the meantime – that time between Jesus' going away in his death, resurrection and ascension and his coming again in glory to complete God's reign on earth. You see, we live in that meantime just as Peter and James and John did. These stories are his farewell address. And since even Jesus himself didn't know how long the meantime might be, he wanted those who dared to follow him and bear his name to be prepared and ready when he did finally return.

He spoke then of a lesson which could be learned from foolish bridesmaids about being wise and watchful and ready. He spoke, too, about servants and talents and about how we mustn't just sit around waiting in the meantime, but use the gifts which God has given us so that they multiply for the sake of the reign of God. We are, in short, stewards of the Gospel, so don't just sit on what God has given you in the meantime.

Our passage this week, a familiar one to many of us no doubt, really gets down to the bottom line, to a word that makes some of us uncomfortable today, in the church and in the world: and that word is JUDGMENT. Admit it, judgment makes us squirm. Maybe it's because religion and judgment have been so unhappily married for so long. Maybe we post-modern Christians feel that judgment (at least, when it come to our lives being judged) offends our sense of freedom. Or maybe it has to do with our belief that an unconditionally loving God will not judge us harshly.

This text makes us uncomfortable, and maybe that's OK. In any case, it invites us to wrestle with it because we have a bedrock, a foundational belief, a deep trust in the goodness of God, in the grace of God. As a people who believe that our God is still speaking to us and to our time, the words of today's parable do indeed speak of freedom, but not the political definitions floating around in tea party confabs which seem to see everything from fluoride in the drinking water to taxes as an unacceptable governmental intrusion upon their freedom. When Jesus and Paul and others talk about freedom, it is a freedom grounded in responsibility. Perhaps one of the great gifts our UCC religious tradition can make to the contemporary disconnect is to plant those words "freedom with responsibility" back into the public discourse. "Freedom with responsibility" reflects the reality that we live in community – sorry Ayn Rand and your ATLAS SHRUGGED. We are not completely on our own. And despite our brashest claims, and

some are pretty strident these days, we are not truly self-sufficient. I think some of the most virulent of right-wingers need to read and re-read the preamble to the Constitution of this country where our founders affirmed our coming together with responsibilities, not our fragmentation into a nation of stand-alones. What our freedom is about is choosing to either participate in that community or choose to do nothing, both of which have consequences.

This gets me to the heart of what the goats did in this story: nothing. It's not like there were sinners in the usual sense of doing bad things. They just didn't do anything when they saw their sisters and brothers suffering. In this story of apocalyptic dimensions, Jesus paints a huge, dramatic event with all the nations and all the angles and the Son of Man coming in glory and sitting on a throne. But it's interesting that all this heavenly talk has a very earthly focus. Jesus draws our attention, not up, to all this glory, but down, on the thing, the down

to earth thing, that he did throughout his ministry. He noticed people. He noticed people's needs. And he responded. Actually he was just being a good Jew, observing his traditions and the laws of his faith, which always have provided for the care of those who were suffering or in need. This kind of hospitality, for that is what it really is, is still at the heart of how we practice our faith here in the United Church of Christ: no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

All that talk which comes from some quarters about how America is or is not a "Christian nation" aside, Jesus makes it clear that we are in this together. It's not just a matter of how you or I respond to the Salvation Army kettle bell ringers. What's at stake here is how we the people remember this imperative to respond to the needs of others. This week as part of our UCC Justice and Witness network, I sent letters to all the members of the so-called deficit-cutting super committee to remind them that I expect our nation, no

less than we expect each one of us, to understand that when it comes to opinion polls, only one really matters, and that's the one God keeps about whether we cared for those in need, or even noticed them in our midst, like the 1 in 6 Americans who do not know where their next meal is coming from. By the way that translates to 49 million people!

Writing in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, James Brenneman, the president of Mennonite-related Goshen College spoke wisely I think when he said that "Christ's message of hospitality to the strangers among us is crucial to our national health." He went on:

"Jesus is fundamentally interested in systemic institutional commitment to the stranger, and he commands whole nations to treat those on the margins of life with dignity and love. How we as a nation help those who are poor, infirm, imprisoned and otherwise estranged determines what our ultimate judgment will be." There's that uncomfortable judgment word again.

So please don't reduce this text to some little word of instruction about our personal and private and spiritual lives. Without seeing that it is also a core message for our public, shared life. The quarter in the Christmas kettle is needed but so are your letters to Congress and your protests at the Capitol and everything else that would seek to embody God's own vision of healing, justice, and mercy.

That's why I am glad we engaged in the recent UCC Mission: 1 effort alongside our annual Stewardship Week, because in some ways the two represented the coming together of both the personal and the public. And as we hear the words of Jesus today in this classic parable, we are challenged, not to define ourselves as religious or spiritual because we go to church and pray and occasionally make a contribution to a worthy cause or volunteer some of our time to help others. The words of Jesus illustrate true religion that transforms our lives, opening our eyes to encounter the sacred in our everyday lives, including the

sacred within our brothers and sisters.

I really had never noticed until just this week that in Jesus' parable neither the sheep nor the goats saw Jesus in the suffering and the needy. It's just that the sheep responded as Jesus would, out of an awareness that this is simply the essence of discipleship. This is what it means to be a Christian. In other words, we shouldn't need a flashing neon light to direct us to the right thing to do.

Now please note this is not works righteousness. Not at all. Doing acts of love and compassion is not to earn a place among the righteous sheep or even a place in heaven but in response to what God has already done for us in Christ. We love, because God first loved us. That's it plain and simple. There is not other way to live in response to amazing grace than to live amazing love.

So at the end of a year in the life of the church, as we focus on a day of Thanksgiving, these words

of Jesus grab our attention, As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "We can study the exam file all we want, but God only knows what will be on the final."

So if you think about preparing for the Final Exam of All Final Exams, let me say this: you don't pass by simply saying that Jesus Christ is Lord. What Jesus said as he prepared to pay the price for his own faithfulness to God's vision of healing, justice and mercy, is that he doesn't really care much about confession or what you think about him. On the Judgment Day, salvation belongs not to those who have faith, but to those who do faith!

What matters, Barbara Brown Taylor says, is how we behaved when we thought God was not around – not just in church, but in everyday encounters with others, all children of God. Luther is eternally right: We must be little Christ's to one another and see in one another the very image of God.

We have come to the end of one church year; as we prepare now for Advent, and open our hearts for what lies ahead in the meantime:

"What could be more surprising than a God who comes to dwell with us in the form of a poor, helpless child born in obscurity to peasant parents? God came to us as 'one of the least of these' – and still does."

We should be wise, then, and watchful, and ready.

O God, you raised up your Son and seated him at your right hand as the shepherd and king who seeks what is lost, binds up what is wounded, and strengthens what is weak. Empowered by the Spirit, grant that we may share with others that which we have received from your hand, to the honor of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.