

In the Gospel stories we have been hearing each week, we are drawing closer and closer to Jesus' death even though in our calendar year we are drawing closer to the time when we celebrate Jesus' birth. That's because the manger and the cross go together. Jesus was born to save us. He was born to bring God's kingdom to us, to bring God to us. Jesus is God's Word made flesh – God among us. He was born to live with us and teach us how to live in God's kingdom. When Jesus died and then was raised to life again, he inaugurated the new age of God's kingdom and we know that he will come again to complete that work – to fully bring God's kingdom here on earth. In the meantime, we are here living and working for that time. This story tells us how important our 'in the meantime work' really is.

When Matthew put this story into writing, he already knew that Jesus had been resurrected - he knew that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and is alive and reigning with God. Matthew knew how important it would be for us to hear this story and to understand this story. Our future with Christ depends on it.

In this story, we fast-forward to the time when Jesus comes again in glory to be our judge. The Jesus who was rejected and killed is now seated on the royal throne as king of everyone and everything. All of the nations are gathered before him and he separates those nations into two groups – the sheep to his right and the goats to his left.

For the group on the right, the news is good news. They are blessed, they will enter into God's kingdom because they provided food, drink, hospitality, and care for Jesus. For the group on the left, however, it's not good. They are condemned. They did not care for Jesus even though he was hungry, sick, in need of clothing, in prison...

So, the moral of the story is that if we do good deeds we will be rewarded and if we don't, we will face the consequences, right? Well, not so fast...there is always something more to Jesus' messages – something that takes us by surprise and makes us think.

Both groups in this story were taken by surprise. The rejected group on the left didn't realize they had been neglecting Jesus by not taking care of people in need. Even more astounding, the blessed group on the right didn't know they were taking of Jesus when they cared for people in need. None of them recognized Jesus' presence in the world.

How is it that the people who were welcomed into the kingdom didn't realize what they were doing? Well, they were doing what Jesus had taught them to do...and it's a message that we hear over and over again in the Gospel of Matthew...hearers of the word must be doers of the word.

Life in God's Kingdom is more than being about what you have or who you are, it is also about what you do. "Showing forth in our lives what we proclaim with our mouths." Life in God's kingdom is not about what the world values, but what God values.

When we love God, when our values are God-values instead of the world's values, then we will love as God loves, give as God gives, forgive as God forgives. When our values are God-values, we will live as Jesus taught.

And Jesus made it simple for us to understand what he was teaching. He said, "Look, the burden I'm putting on you is easy...I'm just asking you to do one thing...I'm asking you to love. You must love God with all that you are and you must love your neighbour as yourself." And, notice, there was no "except" clause in there that would leave any group of people out of that love...it was just "love your neighbour." Love.

There's a song by Jason Gray called, "With Every Act of Love" and the chorus says, "God put a million, million doors in the world for His love to walk through. One of those doors is you...We bring the kingdom come with every act of love."

Now the great thing about doors is that they work in both directions. We can be a door for God's love to enter the world...with every act of love, we bring God's kingdom...and people will see Jesus in us but, we also need to see Jesus in everyone else around us. There is the very human tendency to judge first and

then only love those whom we deem worthy of our love but today's story makes it very clear that there is only one judge for all of humanity.

Every person belongs to God because God made every single one of us. It is easy to see Jesus in people who shine with the light of Christ – people like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. Closer to home, we see the light of Christ in the people here who are always kind, always working to bring help to those in need. We see Christ in those people – it's obvious.

But we are also called to see Christ in the ones they are helping. In fact, we are called to see Christ in everyone, to love everyone – the poor, the sick, the outcast, the smelly, the obnoxious, the annoying, the rough around the edges sort...everyone. It is not so easy to see Jesus in them...

The hungry homeless man who knows supper is going to be a handful of soda crackers because the soup kitchen isn't open today...

The shaking drug addict whose kids were taken away...

The grieving widow who's alone for the first time in over 40 years...

Tom Long once had a student in a preaching course who was the son of an inner city pastor. One Christmas vacation, the student was at home with his family and spent an afternoon talking to his father about ministry. He talked about what he was learning in seminary, and his father talked about the difficulties of ministry in the inner city and the struggle for justice in and through the church.

As the conversation continued late into the day, father and son decided to get some fresh air by taking a walk around the neighbourhood. As they walked, they continued to talk together, and near the end of their walk, the father said, "It's almost dinner time. Let's call the pizza shop and order a pizza to be delivered to the house. By the time we get home, it will be there." So they walked over toward the nearest pay phone, only to encounter a homeless man blocking their way.

"Spare change?" the man asked.

The father reached deeply into his pockets and held out two heaping handfuls of coins. "Here, take what you need," he said to the homeless man.

"Well, then, I'll take it all. Thank you" said the surprised man, sweeping the coins into his own hands and turning to walk away.

Before he had gotten far, though, the father realized he no longer had any change to make the phone call. "Excuse me," he called after the homeless man. "I was going to make a phone call at a pay phone, but I have given you all my change. Could I have a quarter?"

The homeless man turned around and walked back toward father and son, extending his hands. "Here," he said. "Take what you need."

A glimpse of the kingdom...a glimpse of Jesus Christ. Perhaps that homeless man, and others discarded by society, do not feel like they're showing Jesus to us. Perhaps they feel abandoned by Jesus, and Jesus is far from their thoughts...

But, they, too, belong to God. They, too, are made in God's image. They, too, have Jesus with them. When we care for them, we remind them that Jesus is with them, they have not been abandoned. When we care for them, we let them know they have value. And that can change things. When we recognize Jesus in them, we can't help but love them and, with every act of love, we bring the kingdom.

How amazing is that? We bring the kingdom, we change the world for the better, we build for the time when Jesus will come to complete the work – to heal our broken world, and us.

So, we the Church are sent out into the world on a crucial mission...to tell the world the gospel of Jesus Christ – the good news that God has saved us through him. Jesus has given us the way to be in right relationship with God and together we work, in love, to build for God's kingdom that will fully arrive on earth as it is in heaven. Spreading the good news means more than speaking words...we proclaim the gospel by living in the world as Jesus lived. We the Church must become humble like a child and show hospitality to those in need. In Matthew's Gospel, if you want to find Jesus, you look among those who are worried and helpless, discarded and ignored, like sheep without a shepherd. And, the church that is faithful will be found in exactly that same place with them. Then we will be doors to let God's love shine through...doors that work in both directions.