

**Proper 29: Year "A" [RCL]:** Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95: 1-7; Ephesians 1:15-23;  
Matthew 25:31-46

**Title:** A People Called to Compassion

-----

As I was riding down the street one day, I saw a bumper sticker which said, "Jesus is coming, look busy." Well, that got my attention and I found myself wondering just what the bumper sticker meant – Jesus is coming, look busy. As I thought about it, I decided that maybe it meant a couple of things.

First, I decided that the sticker obviously referred to Jesus' second coming and that in that event we might want to at least look busy, as in busy being builders of the kingdom of God, busy doing God's will, and busy loving our neighbor.

Second, if nothing else I thought a bumper sticker which says, "Jesus is coming, look busy" is at least an improvement over the one which says, "Honk if you love Jesus." And so, it began to occur to me that maybe I could develop a sermon around the "Jesus is coming, look busy" bumper sticker. After all, I once preached a sermon on a bumper sticker which posed the question: What if the Hokey Pokey really is what it's all about. So, I thought, "Jesus is coming, look busy" at least deserving of equal time.

So, I find myself pondering why anyone would think it important to "look busy" were Jesus to suddenly show up, and if so, what would "busy" look like? And I decided that the answer, in large measure, might just be found in today's gospel. Today's gospel which contains the very familiar words of Jesus where he says that blessed are those who gave Jesus food to eat when he was hungry, blessed are those who gave Jesus drink when he was thirsty, blessed are those who extended hospitality to Jesus when he was a stranger in a strange place, clothed him when he was naked, cared for him when he was sick, and encouraged him when he was in prison.

And the righteous we are told are confused saying, "Lord, when was it that we did any of these things? We don't remember doing any of those things for you." To which Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Conversely, Jesus says of those who ignore the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sojourner, the downtrodden -- they might be a little wary of judgement day. You know, sheep over here. Goats over there. The compassionate to the left. Those who are hard-hearted to the right.

Dear ones, this is not a parable shrouded in mystery. This is not a teaching cloaked in that which is difficult to understand. It is plain talk from a plain-speaking Jesus.

Fact of the matter is I find, and I'll bet you find this text difficult to hear. I mean here is Jesus, Son of God, King of Kings saying that when we do not show compassion to those in need, he takes it personally. Jesus says of the poor, "they are my family and when you are indifferent to my family I am not amused."

And we find this text not just anywhere in our Sunday lections, but here on the last Sunday of the church year -- Christ the King Sunday. As we conclude this day, one church year ends and another begins. Next Sunday will be the first Sunday in Advent - the beginning of a new church year. And so, we can rightly say that the gospel we encounter this day is sort of a period, maybe even an exclamation point on all that has preceded it.

I'm thinking most of us probably think of ourselves as persons of compassion. But the question does come up: If Jesus were to come back today, would there be any evidence? Would we look busy in our dispensing of compassion? Or are we maybe too cautious, too careful, too discerning, too judgmental, too guarded, too hesitant, too restrained.

I want to share a story with you. It is a very personal story, but one that speaks to the point that Jesus would make this morning.

Several years ago, I was standing in a crowd outside of a theater near Broadway in New York City when I was approached by a man who asked me if I could spare a few bucks. He was actually reasonably well dressed. He was not particularly unkempt. Nothing about him particularly announced that he was homeless or in need. And he had a countenance about him that gave no sense of urgency. There was no pressure here.

And I started to reach for my wallet when all the filters kicked in. Does this fellow deserve my help? Could he not help himself? Is this what this fellow does for a living? Am I the country bumpkin come to New York City just to be fleeced by a well-schooled and practiced con artist? Is this guy just trying to take advantage of my compassion? What would validate this transaction? Should I ask him what he would do with the money if I gave it to him? If I pull out my wallet will he snatch it out of my hand and run off with it? If I were to give him a few dollars are there others lurking in the shadows nearby who will then descend on me like a hoard of locusts looking for their share? And why did he pick me? I didn't see him talking to anybody else. Do I look like the patsy?

All these filters kicked in. And they worked. They worked because even though I had my hand on my wallet in my back pocket, I found myself saying to the man, "No, I'm afraid I can't help you today."

Dear ones, understand that this man had approached no one else in this crowd of people outside that theater. He had spoken only to me. And so, as I had been the only one in the crowd he approached, I was the only one to reject his appeal for help. I mean this was personal.

Well, I have to tell you, his response convicted me in a way that is burned into my memory. I tell you the truth: When I told this man that I had nothing to spare, he simply looked deeply into my eyes and for a moment it was as if the world around me literally came to a halt. I saw no movement

around me; I no longer could hear the chattering voices of the crowd around me. In that moment the world consisted of just me and him. And with something like a generous smile and looking deep into my eyes, and with an expression which can only be described as one of compassion and a kind of wisdom, what he said to me was this: “That’s okay. I forgive you.”

Now keep up with me here, for this story I’m telling you is the God’s truth. In an instant, like the snap of a finger, he was gone. I looked all around. With some dispatch and with a sense of urgency I wandered in and through the crowd, but I did not see him. I really wanted to tell him that I had changed my mind. I had pulled a twenty-dollar bill from my wallet and wanted to find him so I could give it to him. But it was as if he had simply vanished. The opportunity was gone.

And in an instant, my hearing returned and once again I became aware of my surroundings, and I was back among the crowd of theatergoers waiting to buy a ticket to a show. And in that moment, I knew, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, who had just reached out to me and whom I had, in fact, refused. And dear ones, I suspect you also know who it was.

My friends we are not called to be stupid when it comes to how we are to show compassion or to give. We are not called to be patsies. But we are called to be open to the needs of our less fortunate neighbors. But we can spend oh so much energy constructing filters and impediments to sharing that which is ours to give.

I want to end this morning with another story. I guess you could say this is a two-story sermon. It too is a personal story -- a story that comes out of a time when I was a parishioner at Christ Church in Kennesaw. I had decided to accept the invitation of my rector to administer a shelter for the homeless during the upcoming winter months - to ensure that none of the homeless in our community froze to death. Now know that this is not hyperbole; this was not a made-up potentiality designed to solicit donations. No, this enterprise was created in response to the death of a homeless man who two winters earlier had in fact, sought shelter under the bleacher of a local high school and there he had literally frozen to death. I remember his name to this day. His name was B. R. Hogan. That’s a name, not a statistic.

Well the immediate problem was that the shelter I was to run was to be housed not in downtown Marietta as it had been the year before, but rather in the basement of our suburban church. And the rector told me that my first assignment in this new capacity as Shelter Director was to meet with the two homeowners’ associations representing the subdivisions on either side of our Church. The rector told me that he would have been glad to attend with me, but alas he had a previous commitment for that evening.

Well, the evening came and I can tell you that the air was charged in that parish hall. For about an hour people expressed concern, even outrage – hot, angry language objecting that the church would be busing people into the neighborhood - people of dubious character. Little headway was I making with my assurances of overnight security, the lock-down format that we would be employing, the rules that would be in place, etc. And I can tell you I was feeling the heat and I was feeling quite alone. After almost an hour of being on the receiving end of all this vitriol, I can tell you I was feeling pretty bruised and battered – even somewhat shaken.

I guess you could say I needed a savior. And I guess you could say one showed up. She was a resident of one of the subdivisions and she stood up and addressed the crowd of 60 or 70 people in that parish hall. And she said more or less the following: She said I have been sitting here for over an hour listening to what a dreadful and fearful thing it would be for this church to temporarily feed and house the truly homeless among us this winter. And she said I find myself saying something I could not have imagined I would ever say. I am ashamed of my neighbors. All this church is trying to do, she said, is extend a little Christian compassion, a little food, a hot shower and a warm bed with clean sheets, and shelter to the least of these and all we seem to be able to do is find ways to object. Well, I've heard enough. This winter shelter is going to need volunteers. And then looking straight at me she said, and if you would give me a sign-up sheet I'd like to be the first to volunteer to serve the homeless in this place.

Whew, I remember this like it was yesterday. I tell you the sting went out of the air. The hot air balloon had been deflated. The remaining objections were few and far between, and they were without power; they had no energy. And then a few more come forward to sign-up on the volunteer list that she had started, including in one case, an entire family – husband, wife, and kids. And then the crowd just kind of drifted away into the night and I found myself sitting on a table - quite alone. Just me. And Jesus. And a list of new friends who wanted to be a part of this new ministry.

I'm happy to report that the shelter opened and operated without incident all winter. Hundreds of homeless men, women, and children were cared for thanks to a church that was willing to open its doors, and thanks to dozens of volunteers who welcomed the guests and cooked their evening meal, beginning with that lady in that meeting, that saint, whom to this day I consider to have been the voice of God rising above the roar of an angry and hostile crowd.

My friends we are called to be people of compassion. 'This I know for the Bible tells me so.' And the Bible is nowhere more clear than in this passage from the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Let me be clear - we are not called to a religion of works righteousness. Oh no. But we are called to a faith, a way of being from which works quite naturally flow.

As a congregation, as a church, as Christians, as children of God regardless of what religious banner we walk under, or walk under no banner at all, as human beings created in God's image, we are called to be generous and compassionate.

So maybe let us remember the example of the lady from the neighborhood association – the lady whose words and deed just kind of sucked all the negativity, all the fear-based filters that inhibit the impulse to compassion and charity – sucked all that right out of the room.

And let us keep the words of the man who approached me on a sidewalk in New York City, and the words of Jesus on our hearts and minds this day and all year long such that if Jesus were to come back today, he might say of us, "Well done my good and faithful servants. I see that you have indeed been busy – busy living faithful and faith-filled lives.

*Amen.*