Christ the King Weekend (RCL/A): "Our Lord at His Most Unrecognizable"
Matthew 25:31-46
November 21-22, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Teachers were taking a break in the faculty room from the frenetic pace of teaching and the deafening volume of teenage voices in the hallway. Columnist Mike Kerrigan describes what happened next:

> Their peace was interrupted by an obscenely loud knock on the door. It was the kind of gratuitous [over-the-top, unnecessary] pounding both men instantly knew had been delivered by the sort of student from whom they'd sought respite [escape]. Father Byrne got up, exchanged words with the young man, and returned to his seat.
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> "Who was at the door?" [a fellow teacher] asked.
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> "It was just our Lord," Father Byrne replied serenely, his Irish eyes twinkling, "in one of his most unrecognizable forms."[1]

It's really hard to see Christ in the person who's annoying us to no end, isn't it? Actually, it's really hard to see Christ much of the time in other people. 'Probably much easier to recognize Him in the waters of Holy Baptism, the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion, the stories in the Gospel, and in people who are being nice to us – especially the ones who are being nice to us when we haven't been nice to them.

Mother Teresa had eyes to see Christ in people others utterly overlooked or outright rejected: the nearly-dead beggar lying in the gutters of Calcutta (Kolkata), the starving child, the beaten person in such poor condition others averted their eyes and passed by on the other side of the street. She described the poorest of the poor as "Christ in His most distressing disguise," tenderly cared for by Mother Teresa and the other sisters in the order she founded, the Missionaries of Charity.

Theologians talk about "the hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*), meaning that God is so much greater, deeper, more complicated than we are that we'll never understand all the ins and outs of God; God's Being will remain largely hidden from us. But Martin Luther pointed out that God beautifully reveals, **shows** God to us in Jesus Christ, especially in the **suffering** of our Lord. Luther spoke, preached, wrote about the theology of the cross, meaning that God saves us through the suffering, death (and resurrection) of God's Son, our Lord Jesus. The theology of the cross also means that God is with us in **our** suffering. Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, is no stranger to suffering. In today's parable of the

sheep and the goats, Jesus tells us He is powerfully present **in** those who suffer, and that when we work to ease their suffering, giving food to the hungry, care to the sick, friendship to the lonely and to the imprisoned, we are meeting Him, serving Him.

> *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:40)

In my book, that is one of the most important verses of Scripture for us to commit to memory, even better, to "know by heart": Matthew 25:40. Loving our neighbor through acts of "faith active in love" isn't a bid to earn our salvation. Loving our **neighbor** is one of the best ways to love **our Lord**. The night before He died Jesus said to His disciples, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* (John 14:15) What **are** His commandments? That we should love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Then our Lord gave a *"… new commandment, that you should love one another as I have loved you…."* (John 13:34-35) He's talking about loving each other all the way to the cross, serving each other even when it's not convenient, even when it costs us in one way or another, even when loving our neighbor ticks off **other** neighbors who don't see love as the highest good. Remember the old hymn, "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love"? Will others know **we** are Christians by our love?

While I was studying this weekend's Gospel to lead our Wednesday Bible study, I got a text from Joan Bowers' daughter, Jill. She sent a screenshot of a pin that says 25:40 and explained that the pin is in her mother's jewelry box. Jill was passing along Joan's request that I remind her of what it means, since I gave it to her a long time ago, probably nearly 30 years ago. 25:40 stands for Matthew 25:40:

> *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."*

I was given the pin by a pastor in the MetroChicago Synod, which I belonged to before moving back East. He used to carry around a baggie full of those pins, to remind everyone of the importance of caring for our Lord in the last, the lost and the least. I'm thinking I gave the pin to Joan and other Social Ministry

members "back in the day," to thank them for supporting and volunteering at the food pantry, for collecting coats, underwear, socks, for the shelters in Asbury Park, for housing temporarily homeless families through Family Promise, for providing for the sick by donating to Dr. Ana Sweeney's Free Medical Clinic, and for giving hope to women who had just been released from prison and reunited to their families through the organization RedeemHer. I hadn't thought about the pin for a very long time, and then it resurfaced while I was studying this Gospel, including that verse. What a reminder the Holy Spirit is always hard at work to get our attention!

We are called to share our material blessings with those who don't enjoy the **abundance** for which we thank God this Thanksgiving. The needs of the world are overwhelming, without a doubt, so we're wise to follow the maxim, "Think globally and act locally." We're advised to ask, "**Who** are the hungry in **my** neighborhood?" and then we're urged to feed them. "**Who** are the homeless?" House them. "**Who** are the ill and lonely?" Visit them. Then we're advised to ask, "**Why** are they hungry? **Why** are they homeless? **Why** are they ill?" Identifying the dynamics, the failure of the social safety net, opens our hearts to do the problem-solving that not only addresses suffering, but aims to short circuit and prevent it.

Next weekend Advent begins, and then it will be Christmas before we know it! Our parable today has to do with what we should be doing **now** in order to greet the Lord **later** when He returns in glory. Here's a legend connecting His coming once with His coming again. It's called *The Fourth Wise Man.* The story goes that originally Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar were not the only wise men/astrologers following the star of Bethlehem to find and adore the Baby Jesus. There was a 4th named Artaban. The gifts he packed to present to the Child were jewels: a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl. He was to rendezvous with the other three at a certain place and time, to join their caravan. But on the way to the meet he came upon a man sick with fever, and Artaban delayed to help and cure him. He then had to sell the sapphire in order to buy his own camels and servants to carry him across the desert. He finally came to Bethlehem

but so late that Mary, Joseph and the Baby were no longer there. They had fled to Egypt because Herod had ordered the slaughter of the innocents, hoping to destroy the newborn King of the Jews. Artaban found himself in a house where there was a child whose mother was beside herself with fear for the child's life, because soldiers were beating at the door. Artaban bribed the captain of the soldiers with the ruby, to leave the house and child unharmed. Afterwards, he continued his journey for years, looking for the Christ, no longer a child. Thirty years later he was in Jerusalem on the day Jesus was going to be crucified. He thought he might be able to save Jesus' life and prevent His death by offering the pearl he had carried for long years as a gift for the Child. But he heard cries of despair nearby from a young woman who was being sold into slavery to pay her father's debt. She begged Artaban's help, and he gave the pearl to satisfy the debt and prevent the girl from being carried away. The crucifixion took place. The skies darkened and an earthquake occurred. Artaban was struck in the head by a tile that flew off the roof as the earth shook. The young woman he had saved cradled his head in her lap as he drifted in and out of consciousness. At one point she heard him whisper:

> "Not so, my Lord. [For when did I ever see you ill and care for you, or see you in danger and save your life, or offer my fortune to prevent you from coming to harm?] Thirty and three years have I looked for thee; but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered to thee, my King." And then like a whisper from very far away, there came a voice. "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one [of] the least of these my brethren, thou has done it unto me." And Artaban smiled… because he knew that the King had received his gifts.[2]

May the Lord open our eyes to His Presence, allowing us to see through the many disguises He wears. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts and hands, as well as our eyes, to serve our Lord in the last, the lost and the least, members of His family. Amen

[1]Mike Kerrigan, "A Priest Finds Serenity in Humor" (*The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2021).
[2]William Barclay. *The Gospel of Mark*, *Daily Study Bible*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 65-66.

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