

## **“What Might Actually Change the World”**

**Matthew 25:31–46**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**November 22, 2020**

Christ the King Sunday, what we now call the Reign of Christ, was established in 1925 by Pope Pious XI. It is one of the most recent additions to the liturgical calendar and one about which many of us know very little. You need not feel too badly if you could not have identified how old the celebration is or when it takes place each year. But the day has an interesting history and a noble purpose.

Silas Henderson summarizes the Pope’s intent by saying that he wanted to offer something to “a world that had been ravaged by the First World War... had begun to bow down before the ‘lords’ of exploitative consumerism, nationalism, secularism, and new forms of injustice... Pope Pious envisioned a dominion by a King of Peace who came to reconcile all things, who came not to be served but to serve.”

It may deepen our understanding of this rationale to recall that in 1925 Mussolini dissolved the Italian parliament and became a dictator, immigration to the US from Italy dropped by almost 90%; Hitler resurrected his political party and published the first volume of *Mein Kampf*; 40,000 Ku Klux Klansmen paraded through Washington, D.C. and the Klan was the largest fraternal organization in the US with 5 million members; John T. Scopes was arrested for teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution in Tennessee; and a strike for higher wages at a Japanese-owned cotton mill in Shanghai led to police shooting into a crowd, killing 10 people and wounding many others. And all of this came on the heels of a pandemic and a world war.

So, it’s easy to see why the Pope sought some way to rally Christians around a vision of a better world where a Prince of Peace is Sovereign, but the question is — did it help? There was another world war, this time with the atrocities of a Holocaust. There is still great injustice in the world. And even in this great land in the year 2020, there are parallels to the worst of 1925. Neo-Nazis and white supremacists are

growing in number and influence, anti-educational sentiments have returned, nationalism is on the rise here and in Europe, there are still great divisions between the rich and the poor, violence and warfare continue to plague us, and we are suffering through another pandemic.

Adding a day to the Christian year hasn't seemed to help the church or the world around us. Some have suggested that the very idea of Jesus as "king" is problematic because it evokes images of hierarchy and force. We could choose a different title or redefine this one, but I'm not sure it would make much difference. The real issue is not with which title we give to Jesus, but with whether or not he actually reigns over our lives, whether or not we follow his teachings and example, whether or not his Spirit lives in and through us.

In the midst of arguments about biblical authority and theories of inspiration during the takeover of our old denomination, someone pointed out, quite insightfully, that whether or not the Bible is an authority in our lives has little to do with what theory of inspiration we embrace, and everything to do with whether the Bible, however we understand it, actually guides our daily lives. Something similar might be said of the reign of Christ. Whether Christ reigns in our lives has more to do with whether his teachings, example and Spirit guide us than with what titles we use for him and how we understand them.

If we want to prove faithful to our calling and perhaps even change the world in the process, make it a more peaceful and just place for all, we need more than a day's emphasis, we need genuinely transformed lives. Yet this day can be helpful if we allow it to refocus our lives on Jesus and what it means to follow him. There are many ways to do this, but scripture seems like an essential part of the task, and the passage we have just read from Matthew, the parable of the sheep and the goats, is a good place to start. It provides a concise summary of Jesus' teachings, it underscores what is most important to him, and thus it clarifies what our lives will look like if he is guiding us.

We are so familiar with this parable that it is tempting to think we know everything there is to know about it, which is not very likely since this is a parable of Jesus, but even if we know what the parable says and

means, knowing and doing are two different things. In the parable, when the Son of Man comes on Judgment Day and separates the sheep from the goats, he does not tell the sheep that they are blessed by God and will enter God's realm because they knew it was important to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the prisoner, care for the sick. He tells them they are blessed and will enter God's realm because they fed the hungry and welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked and visited the prisoner, cared for the sick.

Knowing and doing are two different things, and it is what we do that matters. It is what we do that makes the world a more peaceful and just place. And it is what we do that convinces others that there is something to our claim that Jesus has changed us.

I have shared with some of you before a story about an agnostic journalist who was on his deathbed. A friend who was a minister saw this as his last opportunity to convert the man. So, he talked to him at length about who he understood Jesus to be and why it was so important to trust in him. He went on and on, as some ministers can do, but when he finally paused and came up for air, the man said, "Are you talking about Christian faith, life lived according to the teachings of Jesus? I'm all for it! When does it begin?" Gandhi once said that he had nothing but admiration for Jesus. It was many of his followers who troubled him.

We must not miss the significance here, especially in this time when many people, especially many young people, are ready to write off the church because of its hypocrisy, and when people claiming the name of Jesus have said and done horrendous things as a part of our political process. There are hypocrites everywhere, and no one is perfect — we rely on grace — but in the context of grace, might we do a better job of following Jesus in the ways that matter? Set aside changing the world, the future of the church may depend on our growth in this realm!

The good news is we do follow Jesus in this church in many ways. We feed the hungry through our give-back food truck and by working with ministries like Rise Against Hunger, Urban Ministries and the Men's Shelter. We clothe the inadequately clothed through our clothing ministry — roughly 14,000 people in a normal year. We care for the

sick. Some of us have visited those in prison or helped inmates' families over the years through the Angel Tree ministry. And we address many other human concerns through the Mike Morris Fellowship Fund, Habitat for Humanity, Interact and many other connections.

We also welcome the stranger — the alien, the immigrant and refugee in our land — through our partnership with CBF field personnel Kim and Marc Wyatt from whom we will hear again in December, and through our own efforts and relationships in, through and beyond the clothing ministry. The Pages in our church have advocated for more welcoming immigration policies, the Selnas have their own single-family welcoming team for a countless number of immigrants, and our church as a whole has embraced immigrants and refugees.

And this weekend in particular, it would be the oversight of all oversights not to mention the absolute miracle of Toy Joy. It is a wonder year after year for so many to serve even more, but to be able to serve safely roughly 900 children during COVID-19 has taken even more adaptation, flexibility, patience and sheer perseverance than usual on the part of Sabrina Tyndall, Carol Blanchard, Mary Powell Rhodes, Anne Cooke, Renee Fulk, John Baldwin and the whole Toy Joy team. If we were together physically now, I would just pause and let you transgress in regard to our usual preference to avoid applause...

In these ways and so many others, we can check off the boxes of things Jesus mentions. His list is exemplary, not exhaustive. He is talking about responding to all human need, but we do a lot of that here.

The question is — are we making an impact, are we making a difference, are we changing the world around us? The pessimistic answer, which has some basis in reality, is — no. No matter how much good we do, there seems to be more suffering in the world, more homelessness and food insecurity in our community. More people in our culture are choosing not to be part of any organized religion. And even among those who claim the name of Christ, quite boldly, in fact, a significant percentage of people do not even seem to be acquainted with the parable of the sheep and the goats and the man who tells it.

How else can a majority of evangelicals support the exclusion of immigrants and refugees, even after thorough vetting? How else can so many zealous Christians refuse to condemn white supremacy for the evil that it is? How else can our own financial wellbeing be so important that we don't seem to care how many people suffer how much hardship as we long we are doing well? We are doing what we can for the least of these in need, but we are swimming upstream, and the strong currents we are fighting are not just secular but a perversion of the sacred.

And yet, there is a way to answer the question more optimistically, and it too has some basis in reality. We are making a difference for everyone we help in any way. Most of us have heard the old story about the man walking along the beach, throwing starfish, washed in by the tide, back into the ocean. When asked what difference he is making, given how many starfish there are, he replies, "A great deal of difference for the ones I throw back." Every article of clothing, every meal, every toy, every expression of kindness and hospitality makes a difference.

Added to this reality is the fact that the body of Christ is so much bigger than us. Even if only a subset of any church is fully engaged in following Jesus in this way, how many churches are there in this city alone, and in this nation, and in the world? If only 10% of the several billion people who think of themselves as followers of Jesus allow him to reign in their lives in this way, what might the impact be of this combined witness of compassion? And many of the faithful are now addressing not just the symptoms of suffering but the root causes too, focusing on advocacy, development, and empowerment.

I realize I am dating myself here, but I think of that old Arlo Guthrie song "Alice's Restaurant" in which it is noted that if someone goes into a public office singing a song of protest, people might think he is crazy. If a group of people go and sing the same song, people might think they are part of a crazy group which needs to be shut down. But if large numbers of people go in all day, day after day, singing the song, it will begin to feel like a movement because it will be a movement. The Reign of Christ revealed in acts of compassion for all in need is a movement, a global movement, 2,000 years old and still growing!

And so, there are different ways we might answer the question about making a difference, but we may be missing the point. In the parable, neither the sheep nor the goats have any idea whether they are serving Christ or not. Those who extend compassion do not do so for any ulterior motive. They just do what they think is right without expecting any reward or assuming they will make an impact. It may not be our job to worry about whether we are making a difference.

When Mother Teresa was asked how she could give her whole life to serving the poor, knowing there would still be more poor people in the world, she replied, “I was not called to be successful. I was only called to be faithful.” Such is our calling.

Yet the final irony may just be that how we actually change the world is not by trying to change it, but simply by being faithful to our calling where we are. This may not seem very promising, but how does Christ change the world? By living among outcasts, by laying down his life in love, and then by being present not just with but in the least of these in need — the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, estranged and imprisoned — that’s what the parable says. “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.” This is no place for a king to be, this is no way to change the world, this is a flimsy kind of sovereignty. Or is it?