

Messiah Moravian Church (Virtual Sermon)
Reign Of Christ (Christ the King Sunday)
November 22, 2020
Gospel Text: Matthew 25:31-46
Dane Perry

CHRISTIAN JUDGMENT OR ACCOUNTABILITY?

(For insights about today's gospel lesson, I am indebted to a sermon preached by Andrew Foster Connors.)

After this extremely stressful and contentious election, I suspect that many of you, like me, are tired of folks judging others and dividing them into herds of donkeys and elephants. Today on this Christ The King Sunday, the gospel lesson is dividing us into sheep and goats. Haven't we experienced enough divisions for two lifetimes already? *Especially* among Christians?

Do you remember Paul's admonition in his epistle to the Romans (14:10): "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." Paul warns the early church to be careful not to lose sight of Jesus or things can spin out of control.

Unity has already been achieved in Christ, he reminds them. So judging each other for eating meat or not is divisive. Judging each other for keeping a special calendar or not is divisive. There is only one Lord in the church – and it's not any of you Roman Christians, Paul says. He insists that unity in the church is possible only through our allegiance and service to Jesus. And like those early Romans, we too must embrace our differences by serving a God who leads by example.

So why then do differences among us seem to light up our judgment radars? Is it a leftover vestige of our early earliest ancestors' survival skills for quickly determining friend or foe in order to stay alive? Surely we have evolved beyond such a primal response, haven't we?

Black theologian and university professor Howard Thurman was a major influence on civil rights activists in the 1960s. He wrote a book entitled *Jesus and the Disinherited* in 1949 that articulated how faith in Jesus gave him and anyone with their "backs against the wall" the courage and faith to dismantle racist structures that had been falsely set up in Jesus's name. He believed that Jesus made it possible for true racial and societal reconciliation, and his perceptions are still compelling 70 years later.

Thurman argued that the root of hatred is "contact without fellowship": encounters between people who are different without real relationships that deepen empathy, understanding and mutual care. For example, Europeans came to the Americas to "subdue" people they knew nothing

about—contact without fellowship. White nationalists chant “Jews will not replace us”—contact without fellowship. People on a neighborhood social media site post “suspicious looking person” when a person of color walks through the neighborhood—contact without fellowship.

Fellowship requires us to question the stories and stereotypes we have inherited or created about those who eat, dress, speak, look differently than us. Fellowship means listening respectfully. Fellowship means having conversations in which we are challenged.

Sadly, over the centuries the Church has failed to live up to its own ideal of unity and instead has produced far too many divisions. It has too frequently marginalized or discounted those who have not fit a superficial understanding of unity that is more about conforming to a particular culture than conforming to Christ. We struggle when we try to build Christian community on our own because sooner or later someone other than God often attempts to usurp God’s judgment seat.

Paul recognized very early that when the church leaves Jesus out, it is in trouble. It’s not the Jesus carved into a statue, framed in a stain glass window, written about in a book. He is the Jesus who rails against any religious hierarchy that puts itself in the judgment seat that belongs to God. He is the Jesus who defines love by washing another’s feet, feeding the hungry, understanding the curse of wealth, dying to end the cycle of retribution rather than living another day to see people continue killing each other. He is the living Christ who knows real fellowship because he lived it.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial. . . . Those who dream of this idealized community . . . enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. . . . Whatever does not go their way, they call failure. . . . So they first become accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves.”

What we really need in the church is not another round of judgment, whether from the right or the left, but accountability. We need to understand that we are not on our own, that we are accountable to God and therefore to each other. As Paul says in the same 14th chapter of the Romans, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

It is that assurance that gave Bonhoeffer the courage to know he belonged to the Lord, not Hitler. It is the same assurance that gave Thurman and his descendants the courage to know they would bow only to the Lord, not Jim Crow. The only way to achieve that kind of accountability in the institutional church is to keep Jesus at its center. When we remove him, someone or something else ends up taking his place – a charismatic personality, a demagogue or an attractive philosophy.

For the church, unity is not an ideal. It is a divine gift that we receive when we leave the judging to God and realize that the only Lord over us is the one we find washing our feet, asking us to do the same for others. The only Lord over us is the one who told us that the people we think of as our enemies are actually neighbors we don't yet know. The only Lord over us is the one who encourages us to see abundance where we so often see scarcity and to see life where we see only death.

The only lord over us is the Lord who doesn't lord it over anyone.

PRAYER: (written by Jin Burklo)

Dear One, closer to us than our own hearts, farther from us than the most distant star, you are beyond naming.

May your powerful presence become obvious not only in the undeniable glory of the sky, but also in the seemingly base and common processes of the earth.

Give us what we need, day by day, to keep body and soul together, because clever as you have made us, we still owe our existence to you.

We recognize that to be reconciled with you, we must live peaceably and justly with other human beings, putting hate and bitterness behind us.

We are torn between our faith in your goodness and our awareness of the evil in your creation, so deliver us from the temptation to despair.

Yours alone is the universe and all its majesty and beauty.

So it is, Amen.

BENEDICTION: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.
Amen