

“Gather before the King!”

[The video, “*Name Above All Names*” was shown prior to the Prelude.]

[The video, “*This Place*” was shown after the Scripture Reading and before the Sermon.]

Everyone has needs but there are many folks in the world, who face significant difficulties. Their problems range from issues related to poverty and/or powerlessness and/or illness and/or prejudice. A large number of people are looking for help, so they can make it in the face of such hardships. But, to whom or where can they turn for the support, comfort, and encouragement they need? During the Public Ministry of Jesus, he made it very clear our Divine Parent is concerned about everyone’s welfare. **Indeed, God sent the Only Son, Jesus the Christ, into this world to demonstrate the Almighty’s Agape Love for all people!** Jesus not only taught his followers to love their neighbors as themselves but he also lived such love toward all types of persons – the poor, the powerless, the sick, the rejected, and those considered to be “sinners” by the leaders of the Jewish religious community.

Toward the conclusion of Jesus’ Public Ministry, as he was approaching his own public rejection and death, he was reported in today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading to have emphasized the need for his disciples to follow his example of living out God’s Agape Love toward all people. Unfortunately, the public understanding of Jesus and his teachings has led most people to perceive the focus of this Scripture to be about the Final Judgment and how we can individually make sure we receive the benefit or reward of Eternal Life. **However, I believe a more accurate understanding of what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, including us, is that we, who belong to him – our King, will naturally gather before him and follow his example of living God’s Agape Love toward everyone.** Further, by living this sacrificial and self-giving love, we continue to be under his and our Divine Parent’s Reign – to live as citizens of God’s Kingdom! Yes, that means we will be blessed both in this earthly life and in our lives after physical death when we will live in union with the Almighty’s Kingdom or Heaven. So, let’s not focus so much on how we as individuals can make sure we end up in Heaven but on how we can already live under Jesus’ reign – live in God’s Partially Fulfilled Kingdom.

John Jewell shares, “One of my favorite cartoons of all time is one from the Peanuts comic strip.” Jewell continues, “In this particular one, **Snoopy is sitting in the doorway of his dog house shivering violently during a winter storm.**” You can see that it is near Christmas time by the decorations on the dog house. Charlie Brown and Lucy are walking by - all bundled up and warm as toast. ‘Be of good cheer, Snoopy,’ Charlie Brown says. ‘Yes, be of good cheer,’ Lucy replies. And they keep on walking as Snoopy sits there with chattering teeth.”

Jewell summarizes, “The message of the cartoon was powerful. The most noxious lifestyle of all is when compassionate words come from a care-less heart. Snoopy would no doubt prefer a blanket over a greeting.” Jewell concludes, **“A compassionate heart is a reflection of the heart of God.”** (Shared by John Jewell, in “Be Compassionate”)

Instead of understanding today’s Reading to be about how, as individuals, we can obtain life after death – eternal life, a closer examination of the Text reveals Jesus’ teaching was meant to be about living as a community of followers in the world. **Jesus said in verses 31-32, “When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”**

So, Jesus taught about two groups of people. Those two communities showed two very different ways of living. **The Pew Bible reports Jesus saying in verses 33-34, “He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the Kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world.’** The actual Greek Text does not include the word “righteous”. Unfortunately, the translators of our Pew Bible put the term “righteous” in Jesus’ mouth because they had fallen into that public religion trap of understanding this teaching of Jesus to be about what an individual does to earn eternal life or life after death. As I previously stated, Jesus was actually talking about how we as the community of his followers gather before him, our King, to follow his example of living agape love toward those in need. Remember, in this parable, Jesus taught the King praised those following the way of agape love and said in **verse 35, “I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.”** Jesus went on to describe this blessed group as demonstrating humility – being unaware of when they had shown the King such agape love.

The following video highlights Jesus’ call for us to seek justice for the oppressed – to help those who are in need. [The video, “*Seek Justice*” was shown.] The King in Jesus’ parable, who was to be understood to be Jesus, explained how the blessed ones could have agape loved the King when he said in **verse 40, “The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!’”** Unfortunately, the translators of our Pew Bibles inserted a different word than what was actually in the Greek Text. The translators used the term, “followers” when the actual word was “brothers”. It is when we agape love the least powerful and those with the greatest need that we agape love our King!

The other group was cursed by the King in the parable because they did not live agape love toward the King. Note, Jesus did not refer to the folks in this group as being “sinners”! In Jesus’ parable, this group, also, did not recall when the King had asked for their help and they did not provide it. The King explained why they did not recognize their failure to help him in a way similar to how the other group had helped him without ever actually being with him. **Jesus said in verses 45-46, “The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.’ These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.”** I suspect Matthew could not restrain himself and he inserted the term, “righteous” at that point because being a good Jew, he wanted to incorporate being made right by one’s offerings and good works into the understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The translators may have used Matthew’s insertion to justify why they added the same term earlier in the parable.

Instead of seeing this Parable of the Last Judgment as focusing on the individual earning eternal life, the hidden nature of how we either do or don’t agape love God through the way we live and treat others is the more important purpose for this teaching of Jesus. The following tale puts a slightly different twist to the same basic message. Billy Strayhorn said, “There is an Irish legend about a king, who had no children to succeed him on the throne. So, he had his messengers post signs in every town and village of his kingdom inviting qualified young men to apply for an interview with the king. This way the king hoped to be able to choose a successor before he died.

Two qualifications, especially, were stressed.” **“The person must have a deep love for God and a deep love for his neighbor.”**

“A young man saw one of the signs. He indeed had a deep love for God and neighbor. He felt a kind of inner voice telling him to apply for an interview.

But the young man was so poor that he didn't have decent clothes to wear to an interview. He also didn't have any money to buy provisions for the long journey to the king's castle.

So, the young man prayed over the matter. He finally decided to beg for the clothes and the provisions he needed. When everything was ready, he set out. After a month of travel, one day the young man caught sight of the king's castle. It sat high on a hill in the distance.

At about the same time, he also caught sight of a poor old beggar sitting by the side of the road. The beggar held out his hands and pleaded for help. 'I'm hungry and cold,' he said in a weak voice. 'Could you give me something warm to wear and something nourishing to eat?'

The sight of the beggar moved the young man. He stripped off his warm outer clothes and exchanged them for the tattered old coat of the beggar. He also gave the beggar most of the provisions he had been carrying in his backpack for the return journey. Then, somewhat uncertainly, he walked on to the castle in tattered clothes and without enough food for his return trip.

When the young man arrived at the castle, guards met him at the gate. They took him to the visitors' area. After a long wait, the young man was led to see the king.

He bowed low before the throne. When he straightened up, the young man could hardly believe his eyes. He said to the king, 'You were the beggar beside the road.'

'That's right,' said the king.

'Why did you do this to me?' asked the young man.

The king said, 'I had to find out if you really did love God and neighbor.' And then the king told him he had proved himself and was the new heir." (As told by Rev. Billy D. Strayhorn)

We are joint heirs with Jesus and we are called to gather before our King – Jesus Christ. We gather as the community of people, who follow his teachings and example of agape love toward everyone. We gather as the community before our King because we recognize his and God's authority over our lives. Indeed, we are blessed and welcomed into the New Faith Relationship with God – the New Life in Christ – the Life of the Kingdom of God! **Let us live our daily lives showing we follow and belong to God's Agape Love. Amen.**