

Sermon on Matthew 25:34-45

November 22, 2020

by Pastor Dan

I want to tell you a story that comes from a tale you might have heard before by the famed children's author Roald Dahl.

One of the most well-known chocolate bars across the world was the Wonka Bar. There were millions of Wonka Bars out there, and while they were tasty, they were still just simple chocolate bars. There were plenty of other, fancier chocolate bars, even ones made by the Wonka company. But the eccentric creator of the Wonka Bar, Willy Wonka, had hidden just *five* golden tickets beneath the wrappers of *five* Wonka Bars out of millions. *Any* Wonka Bar could have this gold inside, and the whole world started buying bar after bar until all five tickets were found, because each ticket would earn the purchaser a tour of the infamous chocolate factory, and a *chance* to become its next owner.

Now young Charlie Bucket had heard the news... all five tickets had finally been found. But he decided, just the same, to buy a simple Wonka Bar for his bed-ridden Grampa Joe anyway, because he knew it would make him happy.

And wouldn't you know it, one of the tickets that had been reported as "found" was actually a forgery, and when Charlie opened this plain-old Wonka Bar, he found underneath the mundane wrapper the last golden ticket. A true treasure hidden in a simple package.

Which is what humans are, isn't it? We are made in the image of God.

Whatever that means, it means that within each one of us, rich and poor, big and small, there is something special that comes from God. Every human alive is a child of God, and even though it might be *easy* for us to *forget* that... we *can't* forget it.

So what do we do with that knowledge? How do we treat that treasure inside of *ourselves*, and how do we treat that treasure inside of *others*?

Today's Scripture story is so simple I don't think I really have to explain that much. It's all there, in black and white. Jesus Christ says that when all is said and done, he, the King of all, will say to those who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned... *you* treated *me* with kindness. You knew me, you loved me, and in you I am most pleased. And those of you who did *not* feed the hungry, who kept water from the thirsty, who demonized the stranger, who stole from the naked, who abandoned the sick, and allowed cruelty upon the imprisoned... *you* did that to *me*. Your king. Your God. Your Creator, who loves you.

In you I am most displeased.

How simple is that message? "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And yet we see people near and far, ourselves and people all over the world—celebrated people, even—treating the lowest, the unluckiest, the most disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, the aggrieved, the most at-risk... with at best ignorance, and at worst outright contempt.

How can we get this wrong? It's about as straightforward as Jesus gets. The only teaching *more* straightforward might be "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and we get *that* one wrong all the time, don't we?

If we want to be followers of Christ, we have to follow Christ. Christ's teachings need to be behind *most* of what we do... Christ needs to be the spark at the heart of our *actions*, the causes we *promote*, and our relationships with other people.

Jesus laid it out in no uncertain terms: when we treat "the least of these" with *compassion*, it is as if we are doing it to God. We are living into the calling that Christ placed upon us. And when we *ignore* or cause *harm* to "the least of these," we are *displeasing* God.

And so we have a choice. How do we show *gratitude* to the God who has given us so much? Do we hoard those gifts, do we place *them* at the center of our lives at the expense of all those children of God who are suffering... or do we respond to God's love for *us* by showing love to *others*?

I would say that *compassion* is the way Christ wants us to show our thanksgiving for the gifts God has given us. We show how thankful we are for the blessings of God by *being* blessings to those who have none. "The least of these." In that way not only do we show gratitude to the King Jesus described in our Scripture reading... we *follow* that King. We commit ourselves to that King's work.

Today is the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and in *our* church traditionally it's a day we dedicate to giving thanks for the gifts God has given us, as we dedicate our *own* gifts to *God*. On top of that, in the *church* year—the same calendar that gives us Easter and Ash Wednesday and Christmas and World Communion Sunday—today is called “Reign of Christ” Sunday, or “Christ the King” Sunday. It marks the *end* of the normal *church* year, and we start the *new* year next week with Advent and the road to the birth of Jesus.

In that way, we *start* our year's journey with Jesus, and no matter where our journeys of faith formation and spiritual exploration take us every Sunday and all our lives in between, we come right back to Jesus in the end. I was joking with Pastor Eric the other day that the only bar to entry to become a member of the United Church of Christ is pretty low—if you're comfortable acknowledging Christ as the head of the church, then you're going to find something here that speaks to you. And while it may mean slightly different things to different people, the sentiment is sound. Everything we do in this church, every activity we promote, everything you hear from a pastor on a Sunday, every Youth Group meeting, every beach clean-up, every *budget* meeting... *has* to have, at the center of it, *driving* it... Christ. Christ's mission and ministry. Christ's encouragement, and yes, even Christ's demands of us. When we lose sight of that, we are—in the words of the Apostle James—like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

As Christians, we choose to let Jesus be the head of our church and to reign over our lives in a way no possession or star or country or political figure ever could. We let Christ into our lives and God holds us together, so that we can navigate our relationships with country and money and lust and presidents and anger *safely*. If we hold on tight to God, we can interact with those very real aspects of life *without* letting *them* rule us.

Christ reigns differently than any King or President ever did. When Christ reigns in our minds, and our wills, and our hearts, he does not reign with an iron fist. He doesn't conquer or draft or tax. The reign of Christ doesn't look like an Empire, or even one nation under God indivisible. The reign of Christ lifts up the oppressed, feeds the hungry, shelters the stranger. In the Kingdom of God we love our neighbors. We share meals... even if we can only do it over Zoom... with Samaritans and tax collectors and Pharisees and sinners. Sounds like getting family members together for Thanksgiving Dinner. We give with open hearts, and we learn with open minds.

In a year at our church, there are a lot of Sundays where you'll hear about what things Jesus was trying to teach us. One of the reasons we have communities of worship and faith is to learn what it means to live a life that's holy. A life that's better, more righteous. As Christians we have *Jesus'* example to follow, and in my biased opinion it's the best example we've got.

We can take that Christ and his teachings into us by seeking to understand... and by seeking to *embody*. By letting Christ reign in our hearts *and* in our actions. Only then will God truly be pleased with us... and only then can we ensure that *all* God's children have the fullness of life that we all hope for ourselves. Which would truly be something to be thankful for. Amen.