

Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera  
Last Sunday after Pentecost – The Reign of Christ, Feast of Christ the King  
Lecturas: Ezequiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Salmo 100, Efesios 1:15-23, Mateo 25:31-46

*Almighty God, your Son shows us the way of service, and in him we inherit the riches of your grace. Give us wisdom to know what is right and the strength to serve the world you have made, through Christ, and in Christ and with Christ who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen*

Today's gospel is Good News wrapped around tough love; it pits salvation against human performance. In the tough love message there is the reminder for us to leave the judgment business to God and to remain focused in the mercy and compassion business.

In general, people, regardless of what era they live in, dislike being judged for what they do or don't do, and dislike being punished for their actions or inactions even more so. In the gospel lesson today, Jesus seemed to prod humanity to step up, sign up, and to stop criticizing him for enforcing love, compassion, kindness and service to others. He doesn't ask to shape up or ship out in a polite way, he just comes out and says that one would go to hell in a handbasket for not doing as He says. The stakes that Jesus lay out for the idle of spirit and the idle of action are high – eternal condemnation! Harsh, yes. But, was he wrong in saying this? If his purpose was to catch people's attention, was he successful? Does he catch our attention today with his message?

Jesus challenges the world to follow Him and live righteously, but humanity resists. The gospel story today lays out the consequences and leans on judgment day as the big catch. I wonder if there is a correlation between harsh biblical messages and increased secularism; so, for example, do you think that Jesus' tough love messages keep folks away from church? I'm not sure about that because most of the gospel messages are not about tough love, they are about love – period. We all have friends and family that aren't church goers and I don't think we hear them saying that Jesus keeps them out of the church as much as them saying that the church keeps people out of the church. For example, the hierarchy, the reasons for traditions that haven't been explained, and the high and mighty religious people who when they think no one is looking steep real low and then with their entitlement, dig their heels in even deeper.

There is a non-denominational, non-partisan online media company called Pathoes.com which provides information from different religious and secular perspectives. In a recent post it was said that most secular folks are indifferent to organized religion given that there are many options aside from church and faith to choose from. The article gave three suggestions for religious people and church-goers to have the biggest evangelistic impact on the indifferent:

- 1) Befriend them – Get involved in the community beyond likeminded and like-acting folks.
- 2) Be curious – Don't volunteer with an agenda to bring someone to your church. Care enough about them as individuals to get to know them outside of your religious realm and for them to get to know you. When trust is gained mutual curiosity emanates and at some point, there will be a conversation about religious beliefs.
- 3) Show them what eternal love looks like – The indifferent to church/religion may not have experienced anything worth investigating. They're consumed with the now and may not understand the concept of eternal promise. When you show love to others by serving them, caring for them, sacrificing for them, you break through their temporal facade with a glimpse of eternal love.

None of us lives the life of anyone else here at St. Gabriel's, but I'm sure that many of you would say that a typical St. Gabrielite is a person who befriends people different than themselves, is curious about others, and demonstrates love through their actions. Our corporate identity is proof of the eternal love we have for God's diverse human creation and we certainly are a congregation that doesn't stand for the ridiculous behaviors that we are hearing in the news of individuals in politics, Hollywood, or anywhere else where men or anyone dishonors the dignity of other human beings. Saint Gabriel's people are gospel people, we walk the walk of righteous, loving, and compassionate behavior which are consistent with Jesus teachings! We're gospel people!

Yet despite all our goodwill and good works, we are also a busy people. Lest we become too busy and focused in our worlds, we are blessed with the ministries that people like Deacon Holly continuously remind us to be engaged with: ministries of service to others where we give our stewardship of time, treasure, and talent. You will find invitations in the eTrumpet and on the website to serve Jesus through the people around us in the season of Advent (under Current Announcements on the homepage). Deacon Holly is inviting us to participate in three projects: you and your family can be Christmas Elves for a community of six people with disabilities living in a local group home – we will wrap the gifts after church next Sunday. You can buy food for children who qualify for free and reduced lunch programs by being their backpack buddy – we will package the food collected the following Sunday December 10<sup>th</sup> after service. You can also bring hygiene products for our homeless brothers and sisters who live at the emergency cold weather shelter by Dec. 17<sup>th</sup> or drop them off at the office; we will bring the toiletries collected and package them after that service the Sunday before Christmas eve. These are all consistent with Christ's call to feed, invite, cloth, heal and visit with a loving heart.

As a congregation we are not like the bullies that God had to take issue with in the lesson from the prophet Ezekiel, "people who pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at the weak with their horns scattering them far and wide." Quite the contrary, we take ownership in being liberated by Christ to not only serve and love our neighbor from the inside out, where Christ the King resides, but to also feel comfortable knowing that we are heirs of the kingdom because we follow Christ in thought, word, and deed. Jesus said: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Let's continue being good stewards of Christ's on behalf of all the children of God among us. Amen.