

## Christ the King Sunday – Sermon

The Reverend Kate Cress

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### *Matthew 25:31-46*

*Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, '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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, '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 these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

Have you noticed that when a young person in your life – son, daughter, niece, nephew, grandchild, godchild – is seized with a great enthusiasm, they haul you right along with them? One day you're minding your own business, knowing nothing about dinosaurs, and the next you can tell a stegosaurus from a pachycephalosaur from a velociraptor? Or a child you love is so crazy about tractors and backhoes that pulling up to a construction site offered hours of free entertainment? Or maybe you love a child who is in the thick of a WWE

wrestling stage, when John Cena and Kofi Kingston hold rock star status? Or it could be all about Disney. In my family we've seen those movies so – many – times we can recite scene after scene of dialogue by heart. And even before Disney, my daughter had a long romance with fairy tales. These stories were filled with heroes and villains and reversals of fortune and constant *struggle*. The stranger and more violent the better.

Our favorite ? Cinderella. The Disney version *and* the murkier one by the Brothers' Grimm. And any other version we could get our hands on. Did you know over 500 versions of that story exist in Europe alone? And long before that, ancient cultures told the story of Cinderella. The Greek girl suffers terrible treatment as a slave in Egypt, and ends up marrying the pharaoh; in China, she has a fairy godmother who's a talking fish. And from ancient Africa, we have the Cinderella story of a girl named Nyasha.\*

In this version, a kind old man named Mufaro has two beautiful daughters and, you guessed it, one is greedy and grasping and vain, the other gentle and kind and poorly treated by her sister. Manyara, the greedy one, dreams of someday becoming queen. The gentle sister, Nyasha, is perfectly content to care for her father and the family's vegetable garden, where she befriends a small snake, Nyoka. One day, there's a summons from the king. Every beautiful young woman in the kingdom must travel to the palace so that he can choose a wife. Manyara, in a hurry to beat out her sister, secretly leaves their village by night, traveling through the dark and dangerous forest. A hungry boy approaches her, saying, "I am hungry. Will you give me something to eat?" and she answers, "Out of my way, boy! Tomorrow I will become your queen. How dare you stand in my path?" As you can guess, this happens again a few moments later when she treats an old woman rudely. The next morning, gentle Nyasha travels

this same forest path, meets the same hungry boy, and willingly offers him the yam she was going to eat for breakfast. Meeting the old woman, Nyasha gives her a small pouch filled with sunflower seeds. Arriving at the king's palace, Nyasha meets her sister running away from the royal courts, screaming, "Do not go to the king, sister. There is a great monster there, a snake with five heads!" Nyasha enters anyway, and whom should she find curled up on the throne but Nyoka, the snake from her garden back home.

"My little friend," she asks, "Why are you here?" "I am the king," and before her eyes – poof! – the snake takes human form. "I am also the hungry boy with whom you shared a yam in the forest and the old woman to whom you made a gift of sunflower seeds. But you know me best as Nyoka." And, praising her kindness, this kind and good king asks Nyasha to be his wife.

You can hear in the language, can't you, echoes of our Gospel reading from today? Remember how in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, '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.'

In Matthew's Gospel, the people ask, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And he answers them, '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.'

Do you see what is happening here? Today's passage shows us that those

people who reach out in kindness to the needy do what is MOST pleasing to God. Serving those who are the hungriest, and thirstiest and furthest away from power and ease, overlooked and ignored, the ‘least of these.’ – *that’s* serving Christ. Kindness to those in need is HOW we love God. Because *our* king is *this* kind of king.

My fairy tale loving daughter is in college now, nearing the end of her first semester. And, the other night on the phone she said, “I’m not sure if, in this world, goodness matters.”

Like Nyasha working in the garden or Cinderella sweeping the kitchen floor, often it can seem like everyone else is living it up, everyone else is off at the ball. It’s difficult, living in a world where selfishness and greed can get the upper hand. We teach our children to be honest and show integrity, and yet they see that not everybody operates that way. It makes sense, doesn’t it, that children and adults since the dawn of storytelling have loved a good Cinderella tale? Because this story comes right out and admits the world is unfair and out of balance. Greedy and cruel people do gain power, and sometimes they try to hurt the weaker ones.

The message to us today – especially on this weekend when we celebrate Christ the King – is that goodness *does* matter. Because this goodness is what *our* kind of king cares about. And our mission is healing *this* king’s world. This mission of healing is the core of who the original disciples were and who we are and what we are made to do.

In every version of the Cinderella story, we see how a young woman’s kindness and goodness *do* matter. How kindness and justice *can* prevail. And that is the

promise of the Gospels, too. In the Gospels, Jesus tells people in as many ways as he can think to say it that our *only* job is to seek to please God through simple acts of faith. Just like all the Cinderellas down through time. No matter what the world out there has to say about it. **Amen.**

\*Dialogue drawn from Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe.