

***Lunch With God***  
**Rev. James Van Schaick**  
**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Second Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 18, 2017**  
**Matthew 25:31-45**

Maria Rubio was making burritos when she noticed a 3-by-3-inch face of Jesus burned into the tortilla she was cooking. She saved the tortilla, framed it, and built a shrine for it in her living room. She claims that more than 11,000 people have visited it.

Joyce Simpson, an Atlanta fashion designer, was pulling out of a gas station in Stone Mountain, GA when she saw the face of Jesus in a forkful of spaghetti on a billboard advertising Pizza Hut's pasta menu. At the time, she was trying to decide between staying in her local church choir and pursuing a professional singing career. As a result of the sighting, she decided to stay with the choir. Not everyone agreed that it was the face of Jesus. Some saw the lead singer of the Doors, the late Jim Morrison, and some insisted it was Willie Nelson.

Arlene Gardner of Tennessee bought a new refrigerator and moved the old one out on her front porch. Neighbors noticed that the porch light created an image of Jesus on the side of the refrigerator. Soon, thousands of faithful were making a pilgrimage to their home to see the image – so many that the Gardners disconnected their porch light so they could get rid of the crowds. Again, not everyone agreed that it was Jesus. A skeptic was quoted in the local paper as saying, "When the good Lord comes again, I don't believe it will be on a major appliance."

Clearly, people are looking for Jesus, but apparently, in the wrong places. That's what today's Gospel lesson is about, seeing Jesus. The story itself is about literally seeing Jesus – face to face – when he sits in judgment on the people of the world. But the more important lesson is to be found in the fact that the people who fare well in the judgment are the ones who have been able to figuratively see Jesus in those around them. It is really about treating everyone we encounter as if they matter as much to us as Jesus does.

It's funny, but for all the kindness and acceptance that I have been shown in my life the incident I always think of involved a soccer game. Most people here probably do not know that when I was growing up, I was a pretty fair soccer player. I played all through high school, and when I was a freshman at Franklin and Marshall College, I was lucky enough to not only make the varsity team, but to earn a starting position. It was a thrill, but at the same time I felt like I was under a

great deal of pressure to perform, and to prove to the upper classmen that I deserved my position. I wanted to be accepted as “part of the team.”

I think it was in about the third game of the season that I was fouled pretty viciously by an opponent. As I was lying on the ground, injured, I looked up and saw one of our captains, a senior named Ben Mittleman. Now, except for yelling at me when he didn't think I was working hard enough, I don't think that until then Ben had spoken three words to me. We certainly were not buddies off the field. But Ben is the only senior from that year whose name I still remember, because of what happened next.

On that particular day, Ben covered the ten yards or so between himself and the player who had fouled me in about three strides, and he knocked the man right on his backside. The opposing player, who started to get up, looked at Ben, and decided it was better to stay seated, said, “Why did you do that? I didn't do anything to you!” What happened then is the reason I still remember Ben Mittleman after forty-four years. Ben leaned over the prostrate player, put his finger in the man's face, and said, “You did it to my teammate, you did it to me!”

Wow. You can imagine how this freshman felt. About four weeks earlier they had given me a locker and a uniform and told me that I was on the roster. But those words of Ben's told me for the first time that I was on the team.

Now, I certainly am not here advocating that you go around proving how much others mean to you by knocking people down for them, but do you see what a powerful message Ben gave me that day? I was worthy. I had value.

This is the very message that Christ delivers in today's Gospel reading. Listen to what Jesus is saying. “My love and my connection with creation is so strong – I care so much about you all – that I consider that whatever you do to each other, you do to me, personally.” Think about that means. We are all worthy. We all have value. We are all God's beloved children, created in God's image.

Now, despite the fact that Jesus loves us all, he does have a bias for some. It's for the “least of these,” the members of the family who are in need. I've always found it interesting that Jesus refers to them in that way in this reading. It sounds like Jesus is demeaning them. But what I think is that Jesus is using our own language of exclusion to make his point. It is us, not Jesus, who have decided that the poor and destitute, the seriously ill, those in need, those who have for whatever reason been pushed to the edges of society are somehow “less than” we are. Jesus is emphasizing that building the kingdom of God, if we are inclined to do it, will require us to cross all the social boundaries that we have created for ourselves. It will require us to be present with those we are accustomed to thinking of as “other.”

Sometimes, this may involve traveling to a different place; an unfamiliar culture. Sometimes, it is no more complicated than crossing a few feet of floor during coffee hour after church.

This was a message that resonated particularly with John Wesley. Today's Gospel lesson was arguably the most influential passage of Scripture for Wesley, who once said that he could not understand how such a clear statement of the Almighty's wishes seemed to have so little influence on the activities of those who claimed to fear Him.

Wesley stressed that Christian charity is first and foremost about giving ourselves. Wesley lived his life in a way that gave him credibility when he preached that message. He "walked the talk." And, he stressed repeatedly that the acts that Christ calls upon us to do for our brothers and sisters must be done by us, personally. In Wesley's own words, "we cannot do them by proxy."

Wesley believed that we need to be clear that Jesus does not say "I was sick, and you sent me a card," or "I was naked, and you gave your worn-out jeans to Goodwill," or "I was in prison, and you wrote to your Congressman about fairer sentencing laws." Or even, "we wanted to have a special ministry in our church, and we hired someone to do it." It's not that Jesus would say any of those things aren't good. But Jesus is talking about a different and more intimate kind of activism. "I was sick, and you took care of me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was in prison, and you visited me." You were present to me. You were there with me – even if the most you could do for me was to show me that you care.

These things you must do in your own person, said Wesley. They cannot be done by proxy.

I want to end by sharing a story I love that illustrates another aspect of today's reading. There once was a small boy who wanted to meet God. He knew that it was probably a long trip to where God was, so he packed his backpack with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer, and started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park, just staring at some pigeons, looking quite lonely. The boy sat down next to her and opened his backpack. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the woman looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it, and she smiled at him. Her smile was so warm that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her some root beer. Once again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon, eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was, and he got up to leave. Before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him the biggest smile ever.

When the boy got home, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, “what did you do today that made you so happy?” He replied, “I had lunch with God. And you know what? She has the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen.”

Meanwhile, the old woman returned to her home, where she lived with her grown son. He was also stunned by the look of joy on her face, and he asked, “Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?” She replied, “I ate Twinkies in the park with God. You know, he’s much younger than I expected.”

You see, when you are a blessing to others, you will be blessed. That’s what Christ promised in Matthew 25. When Jesus addresses the sheep, those who have reached out to each other in love, and calls them “those who are blessed by my Father,” he’s not just talking about “hereafter” rewards, but of the joy we can experience in this life. This passage from Matthew is literally about some future judgment day, but it is about much more than that. If it’s not – if following Christ isn’t about more than toting up points to get into heaven – then I’ve gone into the wrong line of work. Worse than that, I’m living with a 64-year misunderstanding of what being a Christian means.

What it’s about is Christ’s promise that life can become abundant and joyful now, today, when we reach out, when we step across boundaries – when we give ourselves.