

Shepherd of Israel, help us hear no voice but yours. Gather into Christ's holy reign the broken, the sorrowing, and the sinner, that all may know wholeness, joy, and forgiveness. Amenⁱ

This is the week when we turn a page on the church calendar. Next week we begin a new year when Advent begins. But for today it is the big finish for the Christian Year. With fanfare it is Christ the King Sunday. In Advent we celebrate the first coming of Christ to the earth. And today we hear words spoken of a Final Judgment or the Second Advent, the 2nd coming when the king of all creation will sit on his throne in glory. These two comings or advents are the bread of the Christian year sandwich, the bookends, so to speak.

Matthew 25:31-46

25:31 "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.

25:32 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,

25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

25:34 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;

25:35 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,

25:36 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.'

25:37 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?

25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

25:40 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.'

25:41 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;

25:42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

25:43 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.'

25:44 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?'

25:45 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.'

25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Proclamation of the Word

Lucie B. Eggleston of Columbia, SC writes:

Our ordinary lives contain extraordinary moments. One such moment happened in 1960, in a small liberal-arts college in North Carolina (Davidson College, I believe). On the Monday before Thanksgiving, freshmen in a required English class were asked to write a one-page essay on a Thanksgiving memory from childhood.

One freshman wrote about a cardboard turkey that stood on the breakfast table in his home in Alabama throughout the month of November. The turkey had 30 slots, and each morning he filled a slot with a dime for the children at Thornwell, a Presbyterian home 350 miles away in Clinton S.C. In his essay, the freshman acknowledged that in retrospect, stuffing dimes in a cardboard turkey seemed a little corny. He handed in the assignment and went home for Thanksgiving.

The following Monday in class, the English professor addressed two students by name and asked them to stay after class for a few minutes. He then gave each one of them an essay — the other student's essay — and asked them to read them silently.

One freshman read about a cardboard turkey on the breakfast table in Alabama. The other read about Thanksgiving morning at Thornwell Home in South Carolina, where as countless turkeys were presented to the children, they were told: "People you will never see or meet filled these turkeys because they care about you." I love this story because, I, too, remember the cardboard turkey on the breakfast table. The college freshman who wrote about it is my brother, Bill Barron of Knoxville, TN.

In your bulletin you can read Ben's story. Pull out the insert and see Ben's photo. Ben was labeled the least favorite child. He was beaten, left in a room for days, and continually heard that he was worthless. In a time when we are sensitized to bullying, we also know that adults can be the ones who bully. Children fall victim to those charged with their care. Now Ben resides at Thornwell home for Children, our Presbyterian ministry with children. There he is un-learning that he is worthless, and re-learning that he is a child of God, who is valued and loved. He has caring adults around him who are teaching him that Jesus loves him as they protect, care, and provide for his physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. Chuck and I served with Thornwell Children when we attended Presbyterian College. Chuck and other college students taught swimming to children through the "Thornwell Swimmers." My room-mate and I were big sisters to "Libby" who was born on the 4th of July in Germany. Her dad was so drunk that night he named her Liberty Bell, literally.

My mother loved Thornwell Orphanage, as it was called when I was growing up. She was active in the Presbyterian Women. Then each church's PW sponsored a child, even buying them clothes and knowing the details of each child. These children were literally orphans, but now children are there,

but families are involved in their treatment and healing. So privacy laws now prohibit us from knowing information. Because my mother was the PW Treasurer, she was the one to send the money to our child. But that soon developed into a relationship with Rusty, a High School Boy. I remember her driving down on a Saturday to attend his graduation to represent First Presbyterian Church, and because she was standing in as a representative of the family of God who loved him. I just remember being sad because I missed my mom that day. Little did I know...

I later understood that my mother's care for Rusty grew out of a deeper concern for those Jesus calls the least or the little ones. My mother's compassion grew out of her love not because Jesus required it as we read in Matthew 25 although I am sure her Circle Bible lessons included such passages. But it also came from another place, for my mother knew what it was like to feel unsafe in her own home and to fear her father. He was an Insurance businessman, church-goer, Scottish-Rite member. This was the face others saw. But at home he was an alcoholic and abusive, less physical, more emotional. Looking back, I wonder if he was medicating some undiagnosed depression or anxiety. So my Grandma, who did not work in the 1940s, hid \$20 bills in between the walls of the closet until she could leave that situation with her 3 children. She made a down payment on a little house and went to work doing the finances for Townhouse Galleries Interiors in Greenville. It's the pink building on Main St. She worked for furniture and pay. I still have some of her furniture which probably looks like old hand me down furniture to others. But I think of her grit, courage, and love, when I see her chair, her table. She, like a mother hen, gathered her chicks under her wings and sheltered them from danger.

My Grandma is one of my heroes. That is why our daughter is named for her- Hallie.

My mother's compassion for children at Thornwell came from a love for the broken child, the least of these, who was scared and hurt. Perhaps she found healing in loving another child besides the five she raised. Each year when I give my gift to Thornwell, I do it in memory of my mother, Joyce, a beloved child of God who knew suffering, but also the joy of love. She could have turned into the one who bullied and abused, but instead by the grace of God, she simply had a heart for the broken, the little ones, the least. God's perfect love casts out fear. What was intended for harm, God used for good. Perhaps you have a story like this to tell.

When Jesus stands in judgment at the end of time, he does not give an exam on doctrine or ask how much money we made or how many honors we received. Righteousness looks different. Instead the final exam question is this, "Did you love my little ones, the least?"

When Jesus tells the righteous that they have ministered to him directly, they are confused and baffled.

...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.' 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

They did not even know they were serving the Lord. They just loved from the depth of their heart. The goats missed out for they did not care for the least. They also missed out on the Presence of Christ through them.

As one author writes,ⁱⁱ

"Being sheep of the shepherd isn't about us. Nor is it about being saved, or getting rewards, however eternal they may be. Being sheep of the shepherd is about following our shepherd's lead, and loving others *as he has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God.* (Ephesians 5:2)"

Today as we enjoy the gifts of our children in worship, we know that children are some of the most vulnerable ones, the least, the little ones, and precious in the Kingdom of God. We remember and grieve for Brandon, a 7th grader at Edwards Middle School, who took his own life last week. One never knows what others are struggling with. It is important to be kind and loving.

On Commitment and Pledge dedication Sunday, I shared our Membership Expectations. Two of those marks of discipleship are these:

1. demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church
2. responding to God's activity in the world through service to others

You are already doing this. So many of you here are loving and teaching our little ones who are learning to sing, study scripture, play, and serve in God's love here at Fort Hill Church. You are serving in Christian Education ministry, serving as youth advisors, teachers, and nursery caregivers. You are serving Christ as you do so.

And outside these walls you are doing so as well.

Claudette Bennett is on a mission to reclaim our connection to the ministry of Thornwell. If you want to be involved in that ministry, see Claudette. Dr. Tom Scott is working with students in a Creative Inquiry project to assist the newly reformed farm at Thornwell. The Farm used to provide milk, eggs, and food for the children, and now is using sustainable agriculture practices. "Lush Acre Farms"ⁱⁱⁱ is producing free-range eggs and broiler hens for healthy living for the children there and for sale.

And here our disciples are doing good work in great love. Fred Burgett is a foster parent. Billie Jackson serves as a *guardian ad litem*. Dave Cundiff mentors children at the Collins Home. Parents are helping each other when they are struggling with children. School teachers and counselors like Ally, Jeannie, Joy, Gary, Bobby, Libby, David, Elizabeth, Tracy, Amy, Laura, Erika, Susan, Jennifer, Nikki, Shelly, Chuck, Josh, Courtney, Judy, and Ann serve children in love every day. (If I left anyone out, please inform me.) Some of you are helping to raise grandchildren. We support Safe Harbor and Helping Hands, and today are giving to Thornwell. We could go on and on with the ways our church family serves the least and the little ones.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. But we do not serve a self-important, removed, imperial King. We serve a king Jesus who speaks these words in the last days before he is nailed to a cross and suffers great pain and grief. Our triumphant, risen king Jesus was born not in Jerusalem or Athens, the centers of power and wealth, but in a out of the way stable smelling of hay, farm animals, and cow dung. The sheep and goats are surprised where King Jesus hangs out. When we go to those places in our world of deepest hurt and care for the least, we may be shocked to find, that the one we encounter there is the Lord of heaven and earth himself, the one who brings Joy to the World!

Let us pray:

You raised up your Son, O God, and seated him at your right hand
as the shepherd and king who seeks what is lost,
binds up what is wounded, and strengthens what is weak.
Empowered by the Spirit, grant that we may share with others
that which we have received from your hand, to the honor of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ Prayer resource found at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers>

ⁱⁱ Rick Morley, "A Sheepish Reflection on Matthew 25:31-46" at www.rickmorley.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Find information on Lush Acres farm at www.thornwellhome.org/lushacres/

^{iv} Prayer resource found at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers>