

Where Christ Appears

Sermon by Bob Arbogast

Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan

January 7 & 8, 2019

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon

YESTERDAY / SUNDAY WAS EPIPHANY. Epiphany answers a single question: “Where does Christ appear?” On Epiphany, we celebrate all the ways that Jesus is revealed in this world.

When the Magi come from far away, come to Bethlehem with their gifts, Jesus is revealed as the Lord of all peoples. When the heavenly voice speaks at his baptism, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God.

When Jesus turns water into wine, he is revealed as the Lord of all creation. When Jesus stands on the Mount of Transfiguration in glory with Moses and Elijah, he is revealed as the One who completes the story of the Old Testament.

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Jesus is revealed in all these big and bold and wonderful ways. Each one of them unveils Jesus as Almighty God in human flesh. But there’s more to Epiphany than that. There’s more than those big and bold and wonderful moments. That’s why we read the *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats*.

ON THE SURFACE, IT LOOKS LIKE the *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats* is about the Last Judgment. But there’s more going on in the parable. I’m going to save most of that for another time. For tonight, I want to stick with the parable’s Epiphany theme.

At Epiphany we usually focus on the big and bold and wonderful moments that unveil the presence of God among us in the human flesh of Jesus. But in the parable, we discover that Christ appears among us in other ways, in unexpected ways, in surprising ways, all of them still in the flesh.

DID YOU NOTICE IN THE PARABLE HOW EVERYONE IS SURPRISED? The do-gooders are surprised. And the do-nothings are surprised, too. No one had a clue at all that what they were doing they were doing to Christ. And no one had a clue at all that what they were failing to do they were failing to do to Christ. Christ was invisible to them, to all of them.

But even though Christ was invisible to them, he was right in front of them. He was right in front of them in the flesh. And the same thing is true today, still today. Christ continues to appear among us every day.

Christ appears among us as a hungry child. He appears among us as a homeless family. He appears among us as someone who just found out the cancer is spreading. He appears among us as a lonely prisoner who wonders if life is worth living.

SOME PEOPLE SAY THAT GOD IS ON THE SIDE OF THE POOR IN A SPECIAL WAY. The *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats* agrees with them.

In that parable—and this is what caught everyone by surprise—in that parable, Jesus identifies with the poor and with the homeless and the sick and the imprisoned. He identifies with the refugee and the immigrant. He identifies with all the weak and vulnerable. He identifies with them so thoroughly that he claims them as family. They belong to him, and he belongs to them.

And so whoever blesses the poor blesses Christ himself. Because Christ is present wherever the poor appear, one by one or in surging waves. And whoever blesses the prisoner blesses Christ himself. Because Christ is present wherever prisoners appear, whether one at a time in the visiting room, or fifty or a hundred at time in worship, or by the thousands in housing units and chow halls and prison yards.

ACCORDING TO THE PARABLE, ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE JUDGED— Did you notice this? Did you notice that the parable is not about the individual judgment of all the billions of people who ever lived? No; in the parable, it's not individuals who are judged. It's all the nations who are judged.

And I have to tell you that when Jesus was telling the parable, in the first century, the word “nation” did not necessarily mean a free-standing country, like Syria or Greece or Canada. No; a nation was a distinct and identifiable group of people, like Syrians or Greeks or Canadians, like ISIS or the Klan.

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So in the parable, it's not just nations the way we think of it. It's groups of people, all kinds of them, gathered in front of the Son of Man. And all of them are judged. And they are judged according to how they have dealt with the poor and the homeless and the stranger and the sick and the imprisoned.

Groups of people, all kinds of them, are judged. That means the Congress of the United States of America and “We the People.” It means hospital boards and health insurance companies. It means the staff at a nursing home and at a hospice. It means the

officers at Handlon or Bellamy Creek Correctional. And it means the prisoners, too. It also means the one holy catholic and apostolic church. And it means local congregations, including this one.

IN THE PARABLE, THE GROUPS OF PEOPLE ON THE RIGHT ARE SURPRISED. The groups of people on the left are surprised, too. They all are surprised because they had no idea that Jesus identifies so completely with the people they have cared about or with the people they have ignored.

They had no idea. But the secret of the Kingdom has been given to us. The word about Jesus is out. So there is no surprise left. We know—if we've been paying any attention at all—we know that besides the big and bold and wonderful moments that made their way into Scripture, we know that Epiphany also means seeing Christ in the very least of people.

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Where does Christ appear? That's the question.

Where does Christ appear? You may as well ask, "Who is my neighbor?"

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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