

Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe:

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Ezekiel 34, 11-12, 15-17

I Corinthians 15: 20-26, 28

Matthew 25: 31-46

Twenty years ago I was doing an internship at St. Vincent de Paul parish in the city of St. Louis. One of my ministries was to visit women who were awaiting trial for minor offenses. They were housed in a building not far from the parish. One afternoon, I was seated with several of the women in a dormitory style room lined with cots as we informally introduced ourselves. As the women began to share stories about what happened to them that led to their arrest, a guard entered the room, glanced at us while walking through and then exited through another door. Before we could continue our conversation the guard rushed back into the room, stopped and looked directly at me and said, “Oh, I thought *you* were one of *them*.” His body count was off. At that moment I realized that, indeed, I *was* “one of them.” As I listened to their stories the women ceased to be “other” to me. Instead, they helped me realize how much we were alike. I was not going to be tried in the judicial system for a crime, but I was certainly imprisoned by my own biases, belief systems and worldviews that led me to act as if I was different from the women I was sent to serve. I, too, was in need of healing if I could be vulnerable enough to admit it and open enough to God’s presence transforming my heart.

The readings today describe God as a compassionate God whose heart is moved by the needs of those most often looked upon as marginalized, as “other.” The prophet Ezekiel depicts God as an “up close and personal” shepherd attentive to the most vulnerable ones in the flock. “*I, myself will tend my sheep. The lost I will seek out, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal.*” This is not the attitude of a distant God, but the voice of One intimately affected by those whose well-being is of God’s utmost concern. This God is dynamically active on behalf of suffering people to relieve their misery and bring them to wholeness.

The selection from Matthew’s gospel portrays Jesus, King of the Universe, as a Universal Advocate whose identity is revealed in the “others” among us. “Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters you did for ME!!!!

God becomes the least among us. God becomes the vulnerable part of ourselves in need of healing. The Most High chooses to be encountered in the most low: the

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hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, the stranger and those in need of healing of any kind. This King of ours longs to meet us in our own deep hungers and estranged parts of ourselves. Our Advocate desires to free us from the bondage of bias, to bind up our wounds and to bring us to wholeness. When we are vulnerable enough to recognize our need for healing, God ceases to be “Other” and instead becomes one of us! When we realize that we are among the least, God ceases to be “Other” and we are transformed into the One in whose image we are created!! Only when God ceases to be “Other” can we recognize the Divine Life in ourselves, in our brothers and sisters and in the universe.

We might ask the same question that the sheep and goats asked in the gospel reading: When did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? Jesus might respond: When you gazed into the eyes of a starving child and decided to contribute to a food bank; when you held the hand of a person dying alone; when you listened to the story of a refugee and worked to create just immigration laws; when you defended the rights of all people regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, or creed; when you realized the violence of poverty, senseless shootings and war and chose instead to become a non-violent, peaceful presence to victims of crime; when you recognized the degradation of Earth and decided to work to renew our planet’s resources so that all peoples could share clean water, healthy food and the enjoyment of creation’s beauty. Our choices have cosmic implications. The attitudes carried within our hearts affect the entire universe!

Jesus told his disciples, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory...all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” I wonder if our nation will be on the right or on the left when we are faced with the implications of our choices. Catholic social teaching about the common good suggests the need to change not just individual behaviors but the social structures that create misery for human beings as well as for all life forms on our planet and in our cosmos. We are challenged to take action on behalf of justice that resists powerful vested interests. We are summoned to face political and economic issues and make decisions about the well-being of all who share life with us now and those who will come after us. It may mean that we will become “the marginalized other” as did Jesus, King of the Universe, Universal Advocate whose heart holds the entire universe with compassion while we learn how to be advocates ourselves.

We pray that we as individuals and as a nation will be healed from the violence of fear, greed and ignorance that keeps us at a safe distance from “the others.”

May Jesus, King of the Universe, reign in our hearts.
May Jesus, our Universal Advocate, reign in our nation.
May the compassionate God of Jesus reign throughout the universe.

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