

# Reigning Compassion

November 23 • 2008

## Focus Scripture

**Matthew 25:31–46**

Additional Scriptures

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Psalms 100

Ephesians 1:15–23

**Loving Shepherd, open our hearts and minds to find Christ in one another – in our giving, in our receiving, in our serving, in our witness, in our worship. Fit us for joyful life in your reign. Amen.**

Today is Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday, the end of the church year. This day we proclaim the hope of God's eternal realm of justice and peace. Disciples are called to imitate God's love for all creation, and especially for those who are vulnerable, weak, and oppressed. God is at work through us, as we find Christ in one another.

## Focus Scripture: Matthew 25:31–46

Jesus' teaching in this passage tells how, when God's reign comes in its fullness, the nations will be separated in the same way a shepherd separates sheep and goats. In Jesus' day, flocks of sheep and goats together were common. Shepherds would count their animals at the end of the day, separating the sheep – which needed more attentive care – from the goats. In the Hebrew Scriptures, sheep sometimes are an image of God's people (for example, Psalm 100:3 and Isaiah 53:6). In the New Testament, the image of sheep often refers to those who follow Christ, the shepherd (for example, John 10:1–11 and Hebrews 13:20).

On the day Christ reigns in full glory, Jesus says the nations will be separated based on whether they have fed the hungry ones, clothed the naked ones, and so forth. In this way Jesus announces the judgment of all nations, both Jewish and Gentile, according to how they have responded to the call to follow and serve Christ.

First-century Antioch, where the first readers of Matthew may have been located, had no "social safety net" of shelters, food banks, public hospitals, and social services. The streets would have teemed with the kind of people Jesus names in this passage – people who struggled to survive. Very few people would have avoided the painful sight of so many in need.

There are challenges for modern readers in understanding this text. First, we might hear the truth of Jesus' teaching, but find it difficult to leave our personal comfort zones to enact the mandate. Second, the text can lead individuals or congregations to approach those who are in need as objects of their good works. They may, in this way, donate money or volunteer time all with an eye toward "us" helping "them."

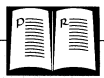
What is key, therefore, is to recognize the encounter that is at the heart of the passage. Jesus' disciples today are called to perform acts of mercy and justice for those in need – to live out God's great compassion. We do these things, however, not simply to "help," to assuage our guilt, or to justify ourselves. In such action, we also encounter the living presence of Christ in one another. In other words, those who have plenty are as much in "need" (of God) as those with little. The encounter with one another may lead to relationships. Acts of compassion may become experiences of God's presence. As we see Christ present in other people, perhaps they will see Christ present in us as well.

The image of Christ as the one who reigns is emphasized in Ephesians 1:15–23. We who call ourselves members of Christ's church are indeed the Body of Christ in the world.

The primacy of God's justice and compassion are also apparent in Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24. God cares for each member of the flock, seeking out those who are lost. At the same time, God judges between "fat" and "lean," accusing the "fat" of depriving the "lean" of what they need to live well. The singer of Psalm 100 celebrates that we are God's sheep. God's love endures and we can trust God's care.

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As we use our hearts and hands to share the love of God, we open ourselves to encountering Christ in others and having them encounter Christ in us. When do you feel that you and your church have done well at being examples of Christ's reigning compassion? When do you feel you have fallen short of the mark? Moving forward, how might the reign of Christ become more visible through you?



Replacement biblical background page for **Lutheran, Episcopal, and Anglican** congregations using the **paired reading** stream of the Revised Common Lectionary is on the Congregational Life Paired Reading CD.

If you have Internet access, visit [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com) to access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage.

