

Christ the King  
November 26, 2017  
Matthew 25:31-46

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### **A Powerful Declaration**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Perhaps you have noticed that many Christians seem not to give much thought to these words of Jesus before us this morning. Talk of looking out for the least, the lowest, the lost—the woman, the Muslim, the poor, the homeless, those without health care, the foreigner, the person of a different race or orientation—this talk has all but disappeared from the public discourse of those who purport to represent the Christian faith. It breaks my heart that even many of my brothers in ministry—it is mostly brothers, not sisters—take stands that are counter to the gospel calls like the one before us this morning. I am ashamed and sad for the church.

In my pique, it was a glimmer of hope to read The Boston Declaration. It's a document that was released to the press on Monday of last week over the signatures of more than 300 theologians gathered for the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, Massachusetts. It is too long to quote in its entirety, but it is a beautiful expansion of the gospel for this morning. Several copies are available in the narthex, and I posted it to our website's homepage. It is also readily available on the internet.

Before saying more about the declaration, I need to affirm that what Jesus says about the sheep and goats has its problems. There are harsh words for those whose faith does not yield loving action in the world. And there is good reason to speak with forcefulness about God's intentions for our behavior. However, we must always keep the context of grace fully in mind. If Jesus speaks passionately, perhaps out of frustration that those who surrounded him did not easily grasp his vision, we should not then conclude that he has abandoned the grace of God which is not won by works but is given freely as a gift.

Still, these parabolic words are powerful. They call to our hearts and to our hands and feet. They prick the conscience and challenge the soul. Oh, that we would listen and heed these calls to faith active in love and seeking justice in our highly troubled world.

Let me now move to the wisdom offered to us by many of the teachers of the church from a wide variety of Christian denominations, including our own. The Boston

Declaration is subtitled, “A Prophetic Appeal to Christians of the United States.” Many of those who contributed to the statement dressed in sackcloth and ashes for the press conference. That explains my own sign of mourning and grief this morning. I mourn for our country, for the gospel, and for truth. And I call upon all of us to bear public witness to the good news of the gospel as we are called and able.

The Boston Declaration begins with background:

“As followers of Jesus, the Jewish prophet for justice whose life reminds us to, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31) we hear the cries of women and men speaking out about sexual abuse at the hands of leaders in power and we are outraged. We are outraged by the current trends in Evangelicalism and other expressions of Christianity driven by white supremacy, often enacted through white privilege and the normalizing of oppression. Confessing racism as the United States’ original and ongoing sin, we commit ourselves to following Jesus on the road of costly discipleship to seek shalom justice for the least, the lost, and the left out. We declare that following Jesus today means fighting poverty, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression from the deepest wells of our faith....

“Following Jesus today means choosing life, joining the Spirit-led struggle to fight the death-dealing powers of sin wherever they erupt. Whenever one of God’s children is being oppressed, we will fight with them for liberation with the power of the Holy and Life-Giving Spirit...In a moment when too many who confess Christ advocate evil, we believe followers of the Jesus Way are called to renounce, denounce, and resist these death-dealing powers which organize and oppress our world, not to embrace or promulgate them.”

The statement goes on to remind us of who our God is and what the Way of Jesus looks like, reflecting today’s gospel word that we serve Christ in serving those in need. Here is a bit of what is said:

“We believe in a God who holds all difference within God’s own life and in whom there is no one or no people who are distant from God’s justice, merciful love, and presence (Micah 6:8; Acts 10:34-35). We affirm the beauty and humanity of all people in their manifold difference—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion—as reflecting God’s image through lives of love and hope. We believe the Jesus Way calls us to the possibility of living in a world where all can love and be loved, and live into joy...This pathway calls us to act in ways that are Spirit-led and strategic in confronting evil wherever evil exists, to combat ignorance wherever ignorance has led people astray

and to place our lives and our bodies on the line with whoever is being threatened, beat down, or oppressed in any way, anywhere.”

Next is a statement of mourning—of lamentation:

“As followers of Jesus who is our Sabbath, who preached and lived Shalom, and who offers the gift of jubilee to the world, we mourn the coarseness of our politics, the loss of compassion for those in need, the disrespect we routinely show each other, and the thoughtlessness with which we use and abuse our planet. We especially mourn the way in which the name of Jesus has been used to support and encourage actions and attitudes that demean others and threaten the community of creation.

“We acknowledge and lament the realities we see around us: broken lives, broken homes, a broken social system that incarcerates more people than any other nation on earth. We lament a broken and corrupt police system, a broken economic system that prioritizes profits over people, a broken sense of national identity. We lament national boundaries that make our worries about security a pretext for destroying the lives of others, and a broken church that disrespects and marginalizes many people rather than honoring and embracing them. We rebuke the ideologies and idolatries that lie beneath the death we see in our midst and collectively hope to point to ways we might all choose life.

“As followers of Jesus, it is vital that we take action when our government seeks to continuously harm life made in God’s image by cutting social safety-nets and forcing the poorest and most powerless among us to spiral into an abyss of desperation. Action on the part of the church is warranted at a time when women, people of color, and various ethnicities, individual religions, immigrants and distinct sexualities are targeted for slander and violence from the highest offices of government. We cannot sit idly by and allow the people and the earth to be accosted with series after series of unjust policies that allow the interest of corporate profits to expunge the future for coming generations of humans and other living species.”

I hear in these laments, as I hope you do as well, strong echoes of the words of Jesus today. The statement then offers condemnations like those our national church has offered over the years—related to oppressive policies, harmful myths, and proliferating weaponry and war. Echoing Jesus, the theologians of the church end with a call to action.

“Choose you this day whom you will serve!” (Joshua 24:15)

“Today, we as Christian followers of the Jesus Way, call on the people of the United States who call themselves by the name of Jesus, to reject all political and social movements that do not lead to life.

“May we live in this world continually welcoming the stranger and ‘treating the foreigner with love, for we were once foreigners in Egypt’ (Deut. 10:19).

“May we bear witness to the hues of difference in God’s life – a God who is neither male nor female and who embraces all people regardless of their identity... May we embrace a future where the legacies of white supremacy are dismantled...May we build not to kill but to enliven. Let us garner all of our economic power to fight desperately for one another’s health, for full stomachs, for equal access to buildings and teachers where we might discover the fullness of our gifts and skills. May our power not be oriented toward empire but towards mutual community.

“May we witness to a beloved community where we seek to be with one another as Jesus is with us. May love and mutuality be the marks of our lives together, our community building, our budgets, and our public policies.

“May we work together to care for the community of creation,...We speak...for the preservation of life over monetary gain.

“May we stand in solidarity against anti-semitism...May we stand in solidarity with our Muslim sisters and brothers and all immigrants, fighting against Islamophobia and xenophobia. We denounce any legislation that discriminates against people on the basis of their religion, race or ethnic identity.

“We welcome and seek the wisdom of all people of all faiths and those who confess no faith, believing that God’s faithfulness breaks into the world in many ways and through many people. May we continue to stand with anyone who calls for justice, mercy, and love in this world.”

Those are the declaration’s final words. And I rejoice that it ends on a positive note. The most important thing we can do as Christians is announce the good news of the Gospel. The good news is the radical inclusiveness of God, for God so loved the world. Not just some in the world who are white, or rich, or male or heterosexual. God loved the whole world of animals and plants and the entire ecosystem that is a victim of what appears to be a rapaciousness and nearly mindless drive for political domination.

The good news, and it is very good news, is an invitation to turn away from greed and turn toward love of neighbor. Turn away from hate and turn towards love. It's actually more fun here in the circles of radical hospitality.

Jesus said, "Love one another." And "Serve one another." And we say, "Amen."

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.