

You Did It Unto Me

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for this Last Sunday of the Church Year is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”** Here ends our text.

Our Gospel reading today is quite fitting for the Last Sunday in the Church Year because it describes the events on the Last Day. Jesus has returned and raised all the dead. He now sits on his glorious throne with all the nations before him for his judgment. He separates the people, the righteous from the unrighteous, as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats, the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. He then pronounces his judgment. King Jesus says to the righteous, the sheep on his right, **“Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”** Why are they blessed? Why do they inherit the kingdom of heaven? Jesus says, **“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”** Apparently, the righteous sheep are blessed and inherit the kingdom because of the good things they did to Jesus when he was in need, when he was hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, or in prison. The sheep scratch their heads and say, **“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?”**

They don't remember doing any of these things to Jesus. Have you ever done any of things to Jesus? King Jesus answers them, **“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”** Oh. The sheep did these things to Jesus whenever they did it to one of his needy brothers, even the least of them. Therefore, they're blessed with the kingdom of heaven and eternal life.

King Jesus then turns to the unrighteous, the goats on his left, and says, **“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** Why are they cursed? Why are they cast into the fire of hell? Jesus says, **“For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”** Apparently, the unrighteous goats are cursed and cast into hell because of the things they didn't do to Jesus when he was in need. They, too, wonder at their sentence and say, **“Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?”** Again, a fair question. When did Jesus ever make his appearance to them? King Jesus answers them, **“Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did not do it to me.”** Oh. The goats did not do these things to Jesus whenever they didn't do it to one of his needy brothers. Therefore, they're cursed and enter eternal punishment.

The key question we need to ask, then, is who are these needy brothers of Jesus? And how by serving their needs, do we serve Jesus himself? It's an important question because heaven or hell is riding on it.

If the brothers of Jesus are understood to be needy people in general, then we need to get busy. We need to serve on the board of social ministry. We need to volunteer for Project Compassion. We need to start a food pantry, a clothing coop, a homeless shelter, and a prison ministry. We need to do more to help the needy so that we do these things to Jesus and thereby earn eternal life. But this interpretation flies in the face of God's salvation by grace alone through faith alone, not of works. Also, not all needy humanity, which is made up of many unrighteous persons, makes up the body of Christ. Jesus doesn't dwell in the hearts of unbelievers so how could doing something unto them be done also unto Jesus? This interpretation doesn't fit the rest of Scripture.

Who are the needy brothers of Jesus? Could they be his half brothers whom Mary bore through Joseph? One day Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, and a man told him that his mother and brothers were waiting outside, supposedly to take him home or to take him to a home for the insane since he was claiming to be the Son of God. But Jesus replied, **“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”** Here Jesus calls his brothers his disciples, all those who do the will of his heavenly Father. Are these needy brothers, then, all Christians? Certainly, they are the body of Christ with Christ dwelling in them, so serving them would also be serving Christ. However, we still have the problem of salvation by works and not grace. And we've limited the objects of our mercy to only needy sheep, other Christians. We earn eternal life by taking care of our own? This doesn't fit Scripture either.

Whom does “the least of these, my brothers” refer to? Not all humanity and not all Christians. There is a third group besides the sheep and the goats. They are the shepherds. They’re not needy because of poor health or ill fortune. They’re the needy brothers of Christ because he’s sent them to preach the Gospel. One of the twelve disciples, Peter, said to Jesus, “We have left everything and followed you. Jesus said to them, **“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”** In this judgment scene, we also have the twelve apostles sitting on thrones beside Jesus. In the Scriptures Jesus specifically refers to the twelve as his brothers.

Why are they needy? In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus sends out the twelve to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. He sends them out *without* food or money, extra tunic or sandals, because he says, “The laborer deserves his food.” The disciples had left their fulltime jobs as fishermen or tax collectors and so they depended on those who believed their message to supply their needs.

How did people serve their needs? The disciples would come to a town or village and begin to preach the Gospel. Those persons who received the message would also receive the disciple into their home. Even though the disciple was a stranger, they’d welcome him. They’d give him water to drink and food to eat. If the disciple’s clothes were worn out, they’d provide him with a spare tunic or pair of sandals. If the disciple was persecuted for preaching the Gospel and thrown in prison, they’d visit him and treat his wounds.

Why did they serve one of Jesus’ needy brothers? Because they received the Gospel message and so they received the messenger. They served the messenger and thereby they also served Jesus. They did it to one of the least of Jesus’ brothers and so they did it unto him. Jesus said to his disciples, **“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is my disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”**

However, many people didn’t receive the disciples. They rejected the message of the Gospel and rejected the messenger. Therefore, they also rejected Jesus. Of them, Jesus said to his disciples, **“If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”**

Therefore, the sheep on Jesus’ right are righteous and inherit eternal life because they received and believed the message of the Gospel. They were saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ. This faith bore fruit in what they did for God’s messengers. They welcomed them, fed them, clothed them, and visited them and so they did it unto Jesus. However, the goats on Jesus’ left are unrighteous and cursed to hell because they rejected and doubted the message of the Gospel. They showed their unbelief by rejecting the prophet. They didn’t welcome him, feed him, clothe him, or visit him and so they didn’t do it unto Jesus. They were condemned like Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment.

But have you ever done any of these things to one of the twelve disciples, the needy brothers of Jesus? They’re all dead now. Have been for centuries. But remember when Jesus gave the Great Commission to the Twelve, he said, “Go and make disciples of all nations . . . and lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.” The Great Commission began with the Twelve, but it didn’t end with the Twelve. Since that time Jesus continues to send out disciples to preach and teach the Gospel. You hear their Words and by the power of the Holy Spirit you believe it. You come to faith in Jesus Christ and are saved by God’s grace alone. You receive the message, but you also receive the messenger and thereby receive Jesus. However, the least of these, Jesus’ brothers, make their living from the Gospel. They have needs of food and clothing, house and healthcare. By faith, you support the ministry of the Gospel. You help to feed them, clothe them, house them, and heal them when they’re sick. But when you do this unto them, you also do it unto Jesus.

Therefore, on the Last Day, you will stand with the sheep, the righteous by faith on Jesus’ right. Our risen Lord will say to you, **“Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”** You won’t be scratching your head why. You’ll know why. You received and believed the message of the Gospel. You received the messenger and thereby received Jesus. Jesus did for you by suffering and dying for all your sins. And you did unto Jesus when by faith in him you did unto the least of these, his brothers. Then you will go away to eternal life. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.