November 22, 2026 Christ the King
Matthew 25:31-46 Pastor Jeff Laustsen

"Grace-Healed Eyes"

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

"Is this better, or is this better? One or two?"

Every eye examination always involves the use of a phoropter or refractor, a mask-like device that an eye doctor uses to determine the proper prescription for those of us who need corrective lenses. It usually involves a series of lenses that are shown to the patient, with the doctor asking which of the two choices is the best. Sometimes the difference is profound; other times, the difference between the two options is so minor that it can be hard to make a decision. In the end, the result is hopefully a prescription that will allow the patient to enjoy life with better eyesight.

I have been wearing eyeglasses since Grade Two, so eye examinations have been a regular part of my life. I have gone through many different glasses (and one brief attempt at contact lenses) that have changed both as I have gotten older and as my prescription has changed over the years. One of the most significant of these changes was over twenty years ago when I began wearing glasses with "progressive lenses," lenses that function like bifocals without the noticeable line. While these took some getting used to (especially when I was walking down stairs or trying to find the correct part of the lens to read the altar book), they improved my ability to see both up close and at a distance. Wearing eyeglasses has become such a regular part of my life that I feel naked without them; as I often note, I do not wear glasses as a fashion statement but so that I can see the world in sharp focus, improving my natural eyesight that has grown weaker as I have grown older.

We are blessed to live in an age where advancements in optical medicine are allowing people to see much better than in the past. Prescription eyeglasses and contact lenses allow people to see the world clearly and enjoy reading and watching television and movies clearly and easily. Cataract surgery brings back the eyesight that had slowly been clouded over, restoring the world view that had been denied a person before their surgery. There are even medical advances that are allowing persons who have been blind all their lives to see colours and images for the first time. Seeing the world through healed eyes opens us to new horizons and also new

challenges as we see both the beauty of the world and the many challenges and obstacles that many people face in their daily lives.

As Jesus went about teaching and proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, he also healed many people of various diseases both to offer them liberation from their suffering and to offer a sign of the kingdom where *"death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4). His healing ministry also gave his followers the ability to clearly recognize Jesus as *"the Messiah, the Son of the Living God"* (Matthew 16:16) and to hear his call to *"love one another as I have loved you"* (John 15:12). As Jesus offers healing of physical sight to those who lacked this ability, he offers his followers the ability to have "grace-healed eyes: so that they might see every person not as they are seen, even by those with 20/20 vision, but through the eyes of our Lord who sees every person as a beloved child of God. The importance of using this divine gift of sight from our Lord and Saviour is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah and a call for us to use our "grace-healed eyes" in our call to continue the ministry of Christ in every generation:

- "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy … And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." – Isaiah 35: 5, 10.

The test of whether Jesus' followers are using their "grace-healed eyes" in the manner our Lord intends comes in today's Gospel lesson, in which Matthew presents the vision of the great judgment that is the prophetic climax of the discourse about the end times that has come previously in this Gospel Following a long series of six parables and warnings (including those we have heard in the past few weeks such as the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Unfaithful Servant), Matthew returns to describing the actual coming of the Lord already pictured in Jesus' description of the coming of the Son of Man:

- "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds and from one end of heaven to the other." – 24:30-31.

The scene in today's Gospel lesson is not a parable but an apocalyptic drama, an other-worldly depiction of the *Parousia,* the coming of the Son of Man with his angels and the gathering of all nations before this throne, modulating into affirmations of the ultimate importance of ordinary, this-worldly deeds. The Son of Man is identified as the king who sits on his glorious throne and admits the righteous into the final Kingdom of God: *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon the throne of his glory"* (25:31). The Son of Man's first action is to assume the role of a shepherd who divides the sheep of his flock from the goats. Placing the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left signals the symbolism of both creatures: the sheep represent the saints, and being placed at the Lord's right hand represents the good, fortunate, or honourable place in Scripture (*"The LORD says to my lord. 'Sit at my right hand until I have made your enemies your footstool.'"* – Psalm 110:1). The goats who are placed at the king's left hand represent those who are considered bad, unfortunate, or dishonourable. The scene presents the triumph of the Kingdom of Heaven represented throughout Matthew by Jesus as the alternative to the this-worldly demonic kingdom represented by his opponents. This is the "counter kingdom" represented in the imagery of the kingdom *"prepared for you from the foundation of the world"* (25:34), the coming of which will be joyful for those at Jesus' right hand and as devastating for those at his left. The two kingdoms – the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world – were often confused and interwoven in the ambiguities of history but will not stand distinct and disclosed at the end of history. The Kingdom of God is the only true kingdom; in the end of the false kingdom of Satan will be defeated (*"If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?"* – 12:26). It will be the fulfillment of the revelation in which the voices in heaven proclaim that *"the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."* (Revelation 11:15). As the Son of Man who has God for his Father, Jesus is called "king" which connotes his identity as Messiah and Son of David in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah: *"Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt the foal of a donkey"* (21:5; Zechariah 9:9). As king, Jesus is the messianic shepherd who comes for the sheep and the judge who makes the final separation between sheep and goats (*"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, for they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"* – 9:36). As the "one who comes" Jesus fills the Christological role interpreted by various figures in the previous parables whose coming signals judgment; *"this Christology validates the ethic of love and mercy that becomes the eschatological criterion for judgment."* (M. Eugene Boring).

The criterion for judgment – whether one is included among the sheep or the goats, at the right or left hand of Jesus – is not a proper confession of faith in Jesus or an understanding of his identity as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords"; what counts is whether one has acted with loving care for others in need. Jesus has previously taught that self-giving love for others is the heart of the revealed Will of God in the Torah and the key understanding the Word of God (*"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."* – 7:12). The messianic king has lived out his teaching that the kingdom consists of service to others (*"... whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many:* - 20:26-28). The fundamental thrust of this scene is that when people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding or failing to respond to Christ. In the end, the criterion that determines whether or not a person is walking as a child of the light are deeds of love and mercy performed for the needy; *"the Son of Man who comes in glory at the end is already present, not only in high moments of inner church life but especially as the one who is met in the encounter with the poor and needy."* (Boring).

The verdict of the messianic king is that those on the right are *"blessed by my Father [and will] inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"* (25:34). Jesus identifies the reasons for this declaration of blessedness because of the ways in which they have served their Lord in concrete acts of love and mercy:

- "… for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." – 25:35-36.

While this undoubtedly came as good news for those at the right hand of the Lord, they are also mystified as to Jesus' declaration, wondering when they saw him and responded in such a way. It is here that Jesus makes his central declaration: *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me:* (25:40). Having been given the gift of "grace-healed eyes," they can now see in every person they encounter as a beloved Child of God who bears the mark of the cross of Christ and has been born anew to a living hope through baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. It is the confirmation that *"the choices we make each day, in seemingly small ways, add up over time to shape the forms of our souls, in ways obvious to those with the necessary perspective and expertise to perceive it."* (Christy Randazzo).

While Jesus' judgment of those at his right hand is that they are truly blessed because of the manner in which they have perceived others, his judgment of those at his left is much different and far harsher. Unlike the righteous, those on the left are told that as *"you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"* (25:41), reminiscent of the revelation in which *"the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophets were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever"* (Revelation 20:10). The principal crimes of the wicked are sins of omission; for *"anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin."* (James 4:17). When the condemned plead with Jesus to identify the times when they might have seen him in need and failed to provide care for him, Jesus responds in similar fashion to his response to those who had seen him in need and come to his assistance: *"Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."* (25:45). It was their unwillingness to serve the Lord through a life of service to others that earns them this awful punishment; *"the opportunities to help were abundant, but the decision to help was withheld."* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). The final scene brings about the final scene of separation as *"these will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life"* (25:46), a moment envisioned by Daniel in which *"many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt"* (Daniel 12:2).

- "Jesus' point here is centered on this experience of simply knowing who is who: if you nearly always choose to treat people with dignity and respect, this will shape you into the kind of person whose humaneness shine brilliantly forth. It will be simple to see, an obvious conclusion based on everything about who you are. Deny the inherent worth of human life, however, and you will be changed, too: a flame deformed, doused, darkened. It can be shockingly obvious when you encounter someone who has voluntarily doused their own human light." – Randazzo.

The will of our Lord Jesus Christ is that all of us received the gift of "grace-healed eyes" so that we might recognize God's presence in all of creation and also see in every person we might be one who is loved and cherished by our Saviour, one who bears the image of God and is beloved of the Lord. As Paul taught the Corinthian Christians, *"from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way"* (2 Corinthians 5:16). When we looked at another person, we see the new creation they are in Christ, and with our "grace-healed eyes" we see them as

persons for whom our Saviour died and rose again and persons who we are called to serve as we would serve our Lord.

- "When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud." – Helmut Thielicke.

We go for regular eye examinations so that we might see our world more clearly and respond to situations that we now see in an appropriate fashion. Our appropriate response to how we now see with the "grace-healed eyes" that we have received through the new life that is ours through our baptism into Christ is to see each person as a beloved child of God who bears the image of Christ and to whom we respond with acts of love and mercy as we would respond if we came upon our Saviour in a time of need:

- "See that you do not fail to see me. I shall be close to you in every poor and wretched person who is in need of your help and teaching; I am there, right in the midst. Whether you do little for him or much, you do it for me. You will not give the cup of cold water in vain. You will receive fruit a thousandfold, not because of your work, but because of my promise." – Martin Luther, 1526.

It is through the gift of the "grace-healed eyes" with which we have been blessed that we see Christ as our true king, the one who will *"come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end"* (Nicene Creed). We see in our Sovereign Lord a "different kind of king" who came not to be served but to serve, and as his Church we are called through baptism to *"serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As we have been given the gift of "grace-healed eyes," may we use this gift of divine vision to see in every person a sign of Christ's presence and one who our Lord loves and calls us to serve with the same love and mercy that we have received from the one who has opened our eyes to the grace and love of God that is all around us.

Amen.