

“Love and Obey”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Christ the King – 25 & 26 November
Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Some of you might not be aware, and I won’t name any names, but at the risk of embarrassing some people who’d rather keep this quiet, you need to know what sort of people you’re worshipping with. On Black Friday, as some woke up on sidewalks and stormed stores, some of our parishioners went downtown to distribute the coats you so generously gave over the past few weeks. Most of them went to homeless people, and many of them also slept on the sidewalk the night before, though not by choice. They will be warmer tonight.

Back in the spring, when we replaced our kitchen appliances, someone here thought of St. George’s, our sister parish in the West End. They distribute food to impoverished people living in a food desert, a place where affordable healthy food can be hard to find, but St. George’s lacked sufficient cold storage to keep supplies of fresh fruits and vegetables or meat and dairy on hand. Aware of this need, a few people arranged to deliver the freezer and refrigerator and more joined together with the people of St. George’s in giving their time, expertise, and sweat to refurbish the space. They’re now certified as a Dare to Care food bank, and that gives the people in that neighborhood access to sorely needed resources which weren’t there before. On a more regular basis, several of our parishioners go down to the Franciscan Kitchen a few days a week to cook and serve food to poor and homeless people. For some, it’s their only real meal of the day.

There are people in North Carolina, whose homes were badly damaged by floods, back in their homes or much closer to being there for Christmas, because in the summer seven of our youth, along with seven more from our diocese, went down to shingle roofs on sweltering days

and replace moldy sheetrock, everybody's favorite thing to do. Rev. Shelley helped lead them, and once a month she leads Eucharist at the women's prison in Oldham County, bringing grace and hope and love to people who have few freedoms, apart from the freedom to worship as they please. A team of parishioners meets frequently with a young woman recently released from prison, coaching her on how to reintegrate with society and enjoy her newfound freedom responsibly.

We have people here who offer their leadership talents to the boards of the Home of the Innocents and the Episcopal Church Home. We have people who take meals to the elderly and handicapped in their homes – and it's worth noting that while the food's important, it's the presence, the companionship that feeds the lonely soul. You might have noticed a tuba sitting on the stage of Board Hall. It belongs to a youth community band rehearses here regularly, most of them not members of the parish. You might have heard them practicing. They perform at local nursing homes, to brighten the residents' day.

Of course, there are things you already know about: the fellowship events that raise funds for numerous worthy charities in our community; the food we gather and deliver to Eastern Area Community Ministries, and the members of St. Luke's who help EACM organize and distribute it. I could go on and on, and if I've not touched upon what you do, please forgive me, but mentioning everything would turn this into a super-sized sermon, and frankly, I can hardly keep up with it all. I suspect some of you are up to things that I know nothing about. Anyway, I just wanted you to know what type of people you're worshipping with: good, kind, generous, merciful people; faithful disciples who think nothing of it.

Now it might sound as if I'm bragging about St. Luke's or disobeying our Lord's command to keep works of mercy secret, not letting your left hand know what your right hand's

doing, but to borrow the words of St. Paul, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.” Except I’m in an even better position than Paul, because, “I have *seen* . . . your faith in Jesus . . . and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you.”

It’s humbling to serve as your priest, humbling and inspiring and encouraging, and we gather here to share and to receive from God and from one another a spirit of humility, the joy of inspiration, and the strength to endure that comes from mutual encouragement. And Lord knows we need as much of that as we can get, in these troubling times, and especially today, where in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus lays down the law in no uncertain terms.

It’s stark, simple, and intimidating. On the Day of Judgment, when Jesus returns to complete his Kingdom on Earth, there will be two categories of people, sheep and goats. The sheep are people who feed the hungry, offer drink to those who thirst, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked that are cold and exposed, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. The goats are those who do not. Sheep enter the Kingdom of God’s peace. Goats don’t, and outside the Kingdom, there can only be everlasting despair.

What’s more, Jesus makes clear that whatever we do – kind or cruel, judgmental or merciful, foolish or wise – we do to him, personally. Think of that the next time you might be tempted to speak poorly of the poor, or look askance at the homeless as an unsightly nuisance best ignored. When people express those types of attitudes in your presence, gently correct them with the loving language of faith, reminding them of the choice we all must make: live like sheep or live like goats; each of us will live with the consequences.

Now that’s not how we like to think about Jesus, as some vengeful tally master, and in large part that’s not how he’s portrayed in scripture. He’s patient, forgiving, a healing presence

that includes the outcast, liberates people from oppressive social norms, despite the opposition of an arrogant and entitled elite, who persecuted Jesus and eventually got him killed, but to no avail. And since that's the majority report on Jesus in the gospels and we like it, that's what we tend to focus on.

But everything Jesus said and did served a single purpose: to reconcile a relationship by revealing who God is and how God expects us to respond. Relationship made possible by reconciliation made possible by revelation so that we can faithfully respond. I call it the four "R's." If we don't know God, there can be no relationship. If we don't know God, we can't know ourselves, and if we don't know ourselves, what hope do we have of participating responsibly in any relationship, much less one with God? Without that relationship, our lives are empty and our futures bleak, because without that relationship tenderly nurtured, none of us have hope of receiving the grace required to be sheep, not goats.

Now if we wanted to sum up that grand revelation in a single word, the only candidate would be "love," unconditional, full of compassion, but to truly understand that beautiful four-letter word, "love," we need to embrace another with equal fervor, a four-letter word that some may find vulgar, but here we go: "obey."

Christian love is an obedient love, because Christ is King, sovereign over all. That can be hard for us to accept. We like the idea that we are free, and we resent anyone who tries to limit or infringe on our freedoms, including God. But we dwell in two realms, in one as a citizen and in another as a subject, and the latter gives us greater freedom than the former ever could.

To love Christ is to obey him, and to obey Christ is to love, and this submission to God's Will sets us free from all sorts of sins: envy, malice, hatred, greed, self-righteousness, judgment, vengeance. All of these things waste time and energy. They waste life, and lay our lives to

waste. But obedience to Christ's love means more than being free from. It's also a freedom for healing, mercy, justice, kindness, generosity; the power to forgive and the humility to seek forgiveness; the strength to pursue reconciliation and perhaps most important the courage and compassion to serve the least of these like sheep.

It's already happening, as I mentioned before, in ever greater measure among the people of St. Luke's, but when it comes to being merciful, there is no such thing as enough. We need to follow Jesus Christ faithfully, as best we know how, emulate his example, obey his command, take encouragement and inspiration from the most sheepish of sheep in our midst, hold fast to the vision of Christ's Kingdom, strive to make it a reality, make ready for his return, avoid the distraction of petty things.

That's a lot. More than we can handle, really. We feel helpless when faced with the challenge of so much suffering in the world. We feel like a drop in the bucket, no matter what we do to help, but many drops make a full bucket. Put a bucket out in a rainstorm, and see how that works. And from a bucket even partially full, you can quench a person's thirst. We feel like a single, short thread, easily lost in the carpet or carried about by the wind, able to mend nothing, but woven together, we make a garment to clothe the naked.

We can take comfort, because none of it depends wholly on us, but on God's grace. Yet the responsibility is ours to allow grace to take over our lives and work through us for the world to know mercy, in obedience to Christ's liberating call to love, in which we find true life. So long live the King! Long live the King in us. Amen.