

**Last Pentecost
November 26, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This is the last Sunday of the Church's season of Sundays after the Feast of Pentecost ... 27 Sundays ... over half a year. Today is also called Christ the King Sunday ... the Reign of Christ. Next Sunday begins a new church year with the season of Advent. But before then, this last Sunday of the liturgical year confronts us with the Last Judgment at the end of time.

Interestingly ... for us at St. Cyprian's ... it is the eleventh anniversary of the schism that occurred when a large group of parishioners, led by Fr. David Allert, left St. Cyprian's and the Episcopal Church over issues of how gays and lesbians would be included in the life and leadership of the Church. That also means that this Sunday is the anniversary of the beginning of a new life for this congregation.

In this morning's reading from Matthew's gospel ... the last we will hear from Matthew for a while ... "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat," said Jesus, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

To take seriously what Jesus took seriously means to care for the vulnerable. There's no other way. In the words of James Forbes, the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, "Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

Before Caren and I moved to St. Augustine we were living in Northampton, Massachusetts. I was serving as the Interim Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church on the Smith College campus. One of my vestry members was Fran Kidder whose husband, Tracy Kidder, is a Pulitzer Prize winning author. I knew his work well having devoured his book *House* while Caren and I were building a vacation home in West Virginia. It was Tracy Kidder who introduced me to Paul Farmer ... Tracy wrote about Dr. Paul Farmer in his book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

The title of Tracy Kidder's book comes from a Haitian proverb "Beyond mountains there are mountains" ... as you solve one problem, another problem presents itself, and so you go on and try to solve that one too. Paul Farmer shows us how radical change can be fostered in situations that seem insurmountable, and it also shows how a meaningful life can be created. Farmer ... brilliant, charismatic, charming ... is both a leader in international health, and a doctor who finds time to make house calls in Boston and the mountains of Haiti ... and he is a compelling force who blasts through convention to get results.

Paul Farmer is a doctor, Harvard professor, renowned infectious-disease specialist, anthropologist, the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, and world-class Robin Hood. Farmer was brought up in a bus and on a boat. It was in medical school that he found his life’s calling ... to diagnose and cure infectious diseases ... and to bring the lifesaving tools of modern medicine to those who need them most.

Farmer changes minds and practices through his dedication to the philosophy that "the only real nation is humanity" ... a philosophy that is embodied in the small public charity he founded in 1987, **Partners In Health**. When Paul Farmer founded Partners in Health, his mission statement for incorporation was: "Our mission is to provide a preferential option for the poor in health care." That phrase, “preferential option for the poor,” was coined by Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, author of ***A Theology of Liberation***.

“Preferential option for the poor” is what Jesus is talking about this morning. This isn't a new idea. It is a prominent theme throughout Scripture, especially in prophets like Amos, and in poetry like Psalm 146.

*God upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but God frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

But, also hear what is written in Proverbs:

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute," (Proverbs 31:8)

When people who were ministering in the poorest half of the world coined the term "preferential option for the poor," they said something not only about our human choices, but also about God's character. In their view, God is biased, even prejudiced. Far from being neutral or impartial, they argued that God plays favorites, you might say, by bestowing special favor on the dispossessed. And God asks us to do the same.

Paul Farmer rejected many of the common "explanations" for why so many people are desperately poor. He doesn't believe that poverty is a result of the accidental forces of history. It cannot be explained away by simply saying "It's nobody's fault," or, "It's just the way things are."

As Farmer sees it, poverty is a result of human action, structural violence, economic policies, and corporate strategies. The enormous disparity between the rich and the poor is not an accident, or something ordained by God as monarchs in the Middle Ages contended. Indeed,

many people are poor because of the choices other people ... people of privilege, wealth, and power ... have made.

Of course there are people who are poor because of their own poor choices ... we all know that. But all too often those people were on that vulnerable economic cliff edge caused by policies that give preference to the wealthy and powerful. Just think about those families that are just one paycheck away from failing to pay their rent ... one medical emergency away from draining their savings ... one corporate buyout away from losing their jobs. Think about a single mother arrested for a traffic violation who cannot post bail and ends up behind bars. She loses her employment, her home, and possibly her children. All the while, the teenage son of a well-to-do couple does not set foot in jail, and pays a fine less than the single mother's bond.

The reading this morning tells us that God is on the side of the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, and those in our prisons. This is an echo of the Sermon on the Mount, except that these words imply action, not just passive acknowledgement. That is what the quote from Proverbs is saying: "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.*" If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously we will not only care for the hungry and thirsty, the sick and those in prison, the homeless mother or the child who needs a coat ... we will also address the causes of those needs in our economic policies ... we will speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Giving to the *St. Augustine Record's Empty Stocking Fund* or the *Episcopal Relief and Development Gifts of Life* program are all well and good, but it should not be the end of our participation in this issue. If all we do is give a token amount to a charity ... no matter how worthy ... and give ourselves a pat on the back ... then we are part of the problem. This has to be a both/and, not an either/or. We have to be willing to speak out on behalf of those who are voiceless ... and for those whose voices are marginalized.

There is a story about a man sitting on the bank of a river when he sees a body floating in the water. He jumps in and pulls the body to the shore and turns around and there is another body, and then another. A second man came walking along the bank, and the first yelled to him, "Help me pull these bodies out of the river!" The second man jump in and began to help, and then he turned and climbed up the bank. The first man said, "Where are you going? There are all these bodies we have to pull out of the water." The second man said, "I'm going upstream to see why they are falling in."

That is our dilemma. It is not enough to just help the poor, we have to work to address the reasons of poverty. Far from being neutral or impartial, God plays favorites by bestowing special favor on the dispossessed. And ... God asks us to do the same.

We care for the poor not out of guilt, or some socialistic or communistic ideal that rejects private property, or because the poor are virtuous. Rather, in serving the poor we care for our own souls by imitating the character of God.

Care for the poor is one of the things that the church has done well. However, advocating for the poor has not been its strong suit ... it has not done well at addressing the causes of poverty and using its power to make change happen. If we take seriously what Jesus took seriously I believe that the church must do better.

Our reading from Matthew's gospel this morning begins with:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left."

This reading is about the final judgement. Personally, I'm not sure I really believe there will be a final judgement ... yet the rest of the reading can be understood as a directive for living this life today. And, it isn't about giving the responsibility away to someone else ... or blaming someone else for the failures of the system. In the very last sentence of his chapter titled "Hell" in his book ***The Problem of Pain***, CS Lewis put it this way: "This chapter is not about your wife or son, nor about Nero or Judas Iscariot; it is about you and me."

Remember, "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."

Amen.

Amen.