

**The Last Sunday in the Church Year**  
**November 22, 2020**  
**PROPER 29**

**The Lessons:** Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24  
Psalm 95:1-7a  
1 Corinthians 15:20-28  
Matthew 25:31-46

**The Hymns:** # 537 (1,2,4) *Beautiful Savior*  
# 353 (1,2,4) *Jesus Came, the Heavens Adoring*  
# 748 (1-3) *I'm But a Stranger Here*

**The Collect:** Eternal God, merciful Father, You have appointed Your Son as judge of the living and the dead. Enable us to wait for the day of His return with our eyes fixed on the kingdom prepared for Your own from the foundation of the world; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**The Sermon:**  
Footprints  
Matthew 25:31-46

*Then the King will say to those on his right, "come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world..."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

One day in chapel I asked the children to solve a little riddle. Let's see how you do. It's a "what am I" riddle. Here it is:

"You take me with you wherever you go. Sometimes you can see me very clearly; while at other times you can hardly see me at all. I am always behind you. I'll never quite catch up to you. What am I?"

Do you know the answer? It's my footprints. I want you to think about your footprints this morning. Footprints are those signs you leave behind you wherever you go. They are the evidence that you have been somewhere, doing something. You probably don't think about them too much. Sometimes they are faint and shallow, but other times they are strong and well-defined, like when you walk in the sand at a beach. The interesting thing is that they are always there, but you hardly ever think of them at all. Nevertheless, they are the evidence that you are up and active, alive and moving in some direction.

If a Christian is up, alive and moving toward heaven, he can't help but leave footprints in the sands of time. These footprints are good works, left in the wake of faith in Christ. Do our "footprints" precede us into heaven? No. But if we have been made alive in Christ in Holy Baptism, trust in Christ and are walking toward heaven in this life, then the footprints of love and mercy and good works must surely follow.

Our text for today is not about what Christians "do" to get to heaven, but it is rather about who Christians "are" in Christ. As we reflect on the words of our Lord this morning, let us consider what we Christians are called to be as the merciful people of Christ.

The whole 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew is part of Jesus' eschatological discourse, his discussion of the end times. It takes place during the week of his Passion following his entrance to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In the previous chapter he has spoken about the various signs that will precede his second coming. In chapter 25 Jesus speaks of what his people are to be doing as they wait for his return. Three things are identified. In the first third of the chapter he tells the story of the Ten Virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom to come so they can go to the great wedding banquet. As we wait for the return of Christ we are to be vigilant, waiting with sufficient oil so that we may enter the banquet hall. God prepares us for the coming of our Lord by strengthening us with His Word and Sacrament which we receive when we gather for worship.

The second third of the chapter is Jesus' parable of the talents. While we wait for Jesus' return we are to be faithful stewards of the gifts he has given us — not burying them, fearful that our Lord is a hard tyrant who will look for any excuse to send us to Hell, but joyfully investing them so they may grow and increase the kingdom of our Lord.

In the final third of this chapter we have today's Gospel lesson of the last judgment. What are Christ's people to be doing while they wait for his return? They are to be doing deeds of love and mercy — feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick visiting those imprisoned. Do they do these things in order to get into God's heaven? At first glance, it might appear that way from our text. After all, the King points to those very deeds when he gives them their eternal inheritance. And it is the lack of those deeds that he criticizes in those on his left who are destined for eternal punishment.

But is this what the text is really saying, that we receive heaven as a reward for our good deeds? No, that would be contrary to the rest of Matthew's Gospel and the whole New Testament where we are clearly told that it is Jesus who had earned heaven for us. He did this by his own righteous life lived for us and by his innocent suffering and death on the cross where he exchanged his innocence for our guilt and where he received the punishment for sin that we deserved.

In fact, when we look closely at the text we learn that the gift given to the righteous is their "inheritance", not their "reward". An inheritance is never something we earn or deserve. An inheritance is our birthright, something we possess because we belong to the family. How did

you and I get into the family of God? How do you get to belong to your earthly family? You were born into it. In the same way we are born into God's family through our adoption in Holy Baptism — the water of life that cleansed us from all sin and gave our new inheritance as members of the Family of Christ. St. Paul describes that inheritance we now have in his letter to the Colossians where he prays that the believers will "live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" and "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the **inheritance** of the saints in the kingdom of light." St. Peter tells his readers that God has "given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an **inheritance** that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you..."

What a rich **inheritance** we have waiting for us! And on that last day, the day of Judgment, when we hear our Lord saying to us "Come, blessed of my father, take your inheritance", we know that it will not be the result of our works, but the undeserved gift that is ours by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

Now, of course, believers will do good works. A healthy tree bears good fruit. A man walking on a beach will leave clearly defined footprints behind him. Where does that fruit fall? Where are the footprints of our Christian life to be found? We might be tempted to think that our primary point of service to Christ is in going to church, giving of our time on Sunday to worship or bringing our offerings. But that's not the case. Going to church is primarily about Christ serving you! Remember the two men who went to the temple to pray, the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector? The one who went there to receive God's mercy is the one who walked away forgiven. The one who saw worship as what he could bring to God was not forgiven. Martin Luther in his hymn on the 10 Commandments wrote: "Set aside the work you do, so that God can work in you!" Certainly when we come to church we praise, thank and serve God in response to the Gospel, but our service in Christ in our neighbor happens primarily after we leave these walls.

Out there in the world is where we leave our footprints of love and kindness — in our homes and schools, in our workplace and community — wherever we have the opportunity to aide and comfort, strengthen and uphold, feed and nurture, clothe and visit. Mother or father faithfully discharging their duty toward their children, children and youth honoring and obeying their parents, Christian students working together with their teachers in the task of learning, Christian employees faithfully serving their employers and employers tending to the needs of their workers, a Christian community preparing hampers for the poor, serving those with special needs, reaching out to the strangers among us with a friendly welcome, visiting the sick and grieving with those who grieve — foot prints everywhere, the Christian life lived out faithfully, in response to the Gospel of Christ.

When I was a little boy I used to go for long walks with my dad. For a while I would walk beside him, but soon I grew tired and began to lag behind. When I saw his footprints on the soft soil of our farm, I started to walk in the prints he left behind. It wasn't easy. His strides were long and mine were short. In order to keep in his footprints, I would have to jump from one to the other

and usually I would come down short of his print. I remember thinking that someday I would grow up and then I would be able to match those footprints he left behind.

Jesus has called us to follow him — to follow in his steps. As sinners we know very well how difficult it is for us to do that. He was merciful and kind. We are short-tempered and irritable. He fed the hungry and gave living water to those who were thirsty. We are self-centered and suspicious of others. We look at the speck in another's eye but fail to see the log in our own. And yet our Savior continues to forgive our sins and day by day the Holy Spirit is growing us into the measure of Christ. One day we will be able to match our Lord's own steps but, to tell the truth, we probably won't even be aware of it when it happens. For on that day we will ask him: "When did we do that, Lord?" "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" And he will tell us that we've been doing it all along — as we lived out our calling as his own dear children, empowered by His Word and Sacrament.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.