

Advent Lutheran Church
Jesus in Disguise
July 20, 2025
Matthew 25:31-46

Y'all know I'm a Texan through and through. I was born and raised here. I lived here my whole life until I moved to Florida in 2007. After spending so many years in one place, that relocation meant lots of adjustment. I went from a big city to a small town, from a place where the population stayed pretty steady to one that swells every year during the winter months, and from worrying about tornadoes to watching for hurricanes.

I arrived in the middle of hurricane season and listened to many stories of storms that had impacted that community in years gone by. And, I started paying more attention – actually much more attention – to the weather in Florida and beyond.

Less than a year after I arrived in Florida, Hurricane Ike hit the Texas Gulf Coast. Soon thereafter, I found myself heading back to Texas for a reason I had never imagined.

Over the years I have led many mission trips. Most have been limited to energetic teenagers and their adult chaperones. This trip, however, was different. It was an intentionally intergenerational group that included high school and college students alongside adults ranging in age from their twenties into their seventies. Participants of all ages were invited to come together and work side by side as a united team.

Mission trips often take you out of your bubble and drop you into places where people live with much less. That wasn't the case this time.

Our rebuilding efforts involved the things you would expect:

- removing debris,
- repairing roofs,
- installing floors,
- hanging drywall, and

- meeting displaced homeowners who were hurting, but deeply appreciative of our labors of love.

Our time in Texas also included activities you might not imagine:

- a prayer walk through a part of town we were advised to avoid,
- jumping on a trampoline with children in front of the home they longed to return to, and
- participating in a worship service and meal with our host congregation on Thanksgiving Day.

By the time we got back on the road for what would become a 24-hour drive in holiday traffic everyone was exhausted.

I heard many moving stories from the trip's participants. One shared that they felt like the first project they worked on was the hardest physical labor they had ever performed. What kept them going was meeting the family and realizing it had the exact same makeup as their own. When they were moved to a different job site, they were not happy about it at all – until they met the elderly homeowner. Every time they looked at him, they could not see him for who they knew he was. Atop this grandfather's body was the face of Jesus. Each time they saw him, they knew they were face-to-face with Jesus.

This morning our Gospel lesson teaches that the one mission trip participant had the kind of vision we all need. They saw something we too often overlook: the people in need around us are Jesus among us. Jesus shows up every day in those who are hungry, hurting, or overlooked. And, in God's eyes, the way we respond – what we choose to do or not do – is as if we're doing it to Jesus himself.

If there was a single person who really understood this it was Mother Teresa. Stories of her life's work abound.

Mother Teresa was a nun known for her lifelong service to the poor, sick, and dying in Calcutta, India. During her life she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts and following her death she was canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. In

ministering to the poorest of the poor, Mother Teresa deeply impacted that community and inspired many to devote their lives to similar work.

She frequently talked about seeing Jesus in the poor and suffering, describing them as "Jesus in his most distressing disguise."

Today, rather than seeing the poor and marginalized in our midst in this way many people are deliberately choosing to ignore them. To act as if they do not exist. To look away.

Which reminds me of another service project experience that invited folks to live beyond their comfort zone. On this occasion I was with a group of middle school students who were serving lunch to unhoused folks. After standing safely behind the serving tables and placing a portion of their item on each guest's plate the youth were served and sent to sit in pairs at each of the lunch tables. Their assignment was to eat lunch and visit with everyone at their table.

As they found their seats nearly every student felt awkward and insecure and uncertain. By the time they finished their plates and were invited back to the serving line for dessert, many students had relaxed and were talking openly with their neighbors.

One of the guests offered their cake to the student seated beside them. The young person wasn't sure if they were allowed to accept this gift, but when the cake was slid in front of them, they quickly devoured it. The other student at that table felt bad and offered what was left of her cake to the guest. The guest refused the offer and said, "I didn't walk all the way here for lunch because they have the best food; I came because this is the one place where someone looks me in the eye and talks to me."

Siblings in Christ, the ministry of presence is lifegiving. And, it is one that we offer freely and deeply when we understand the other is always Jesus in disguise.

This is a foundational ministry. We can layer so much on top, including feeding, clothing, caring, welcoming, and visiting.

And, in fact a quick review of Advent's activities from just this week indicated that many of you are already living this sermon.

On Monday, in the hot afternoon sun, the Lord's Pantry provided bag after bag of groceries to many of our food insecure neighbors. On Wednesday folks made sandwiches for the Arlington Life Shelter and then on Thursday Advent returned to serve dinner. On Saturday Visiting Voices sang in the homes of multiple members. And these are just the most public activities.

Some of you have been waiting patiently to see if I'd mention that this story isn't technically a parable. Several of you are hoping to hear more about the sheep and goats since those are characters more common in the first century than the twenty-first. And at least a few of you want me to dip my toes into the deep theological waters of the final judgment. Each of those is a worthwhile path for a Sunday school class, a lunch conversation, or a future sermon. Right now, however, I'm laser focused on the behavior Jesus praises in this passage.

As Lutherans we know that we are saved by grace not by works.

As people seeking to live out our faith, compassion should shape the way we see the world – revealing not only the poor and the marginalized, but every person, as Jesus in disguise.

Amen.