

Christ Church Cathedral
November 20, 2011
Amy Malick

*Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands;
serve the Lord with gladness
and come before his presence with a song.*

*Know this: The Lord himself is God;
he himself has made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.*

A few weeks ago, I stopped at Burger King on Main, down the street here, on my way to work. I've been doing this Thursday mornings since the season of Lent. I call it "BK Chapel," because I believe God asks me to do this simple thing, and because who I meet there, and what happens there is holy, like church.

I get to sit down with people from the streets, the poor neighborhoods and the shelters, break bread and wine – the bread looks a lot like sausage biscuits and the wine like coffee – and share stories.

This day I met Andrew. He's 34 years old, out of jail, out of work, no place of his own to stay. There are a lot of Andrews. He can't pay for his phone so hasn't been able to talk to his 4-year-old every morning like he used to. A new baby is on the way. He wants desperately to support this child.

When Andrew told me he scored a 1480 on his SAT's – that's really high - I got out my notebook. "I want to be an attorney," he said." I want to help people who are struggling."

I have a son named Andrew. He's also 34, and has two young kids. He's had every break, and his life couldn't have turned out more differently. My Andrew lives far away, and I don't get to sit with him over coffee. Yet here was another son – at least in God's sense of family - this young man, giving to me of himself, sharing with me his deepest hopes.

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. It's called Christ the King Sunday, and it celebrates the reign of Christ - God's claim to this world. Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, when we begin the church year all over again, and watch for Christ, this king, to be born as a helpless baby.

God's truth is topsy-turvy like this. Look at our Gospel lesson today. Christ the King, sitting on the throne of glory says:

"I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was a stranger. I was naked. I was sick. I was in prison."

The stakes are pretty high in this passage. Jesus is talking about The Great Judgment when the Son of Man will gather people before him and separate the sheep from the goats. The people who helped him when he was down will enter the kingdom. The people who didn't help him go to the burning fires.

No one gets what the king is talking about – not even the righteous people.

"When were you hungry or thirsty? When were you a stranger?" they ask.

"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."

Who is the "least of these"?

We don't have to look too far these days to see people who are needy. In one obvious measure, the "least of these" are people experiencing financial poverty.

- In the last five years, the number of poor people in America increased by nearly 10 million people. That's 3 times the population of Connecticut.
- Some 46.2 million people in the U.S. live below the poverty line of \$22,000 for a family of four. That is more than the entire population of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, New York and New Jersey combined.
- Almost half of those people live on incomes of \$5,500 or less. Poverty does not fall equally either. More people of color who live in cities – like Hartford - are poor. More working-class people from the suburbs are poor. More Latinos are poor. More elderly are poor. In fact, poverty is growing in all parts of society but the very rich.

There's another kind of poverty – spiritual poverty.

I don't know about you, but there are times I don't even take care of myself, much less the person next to me in the pew or the people living under the bridges. I may have food on my table and clothes in my closet. But I am spiritually poor when I ignore the stranger in myself, or the hunger in my sister here who needs a phone call or a bowl of chicken soup when she's home sick.

We all are “the least of these,” the sheep who go astray in self-absorption, busyness, and pride.

“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. And these will go away into eternal punishment...”

Who will save us in our desperate poverty? Here's the good news in God's Word today.

We hear in today's Psalm that *we* are God's people; *we* are the sheep of his pasture.

Ezekiel brings us good news: “Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.”

I believe God does this literally. God does this at Christ Church Cathedral. Jesus, the king *and* shepherd, is at our doorstep. He is right in our midst. He is lining up in our alley.

Here's what he's saying:

I am searching for you. You might not recognize me.

I need a diaper for my baby. My boyfriend stole the diapers again last night to sell on the street for drug money.

I don't smell that great. The shower line was too long at the shelter, so I gave up and layered these sweaters and coats so I could leave at 7 for another day on the streets til I can get back to the shelter at 5.

I woke up under a bridge. My blankets are soaked from the rain. Bed bugs have ruined all my clothes.

I've been sitting all night on the cold concrete steps in Bushnell Park. I got released from prison yesterday and the bus dropped me off with no money and no way home.

Jesus has come to the right place today. We are rich here at the Cathedral. There's probably not a person here who hasn't contributed to Church Street Eats in some way, or to hospitality or music or to the many, many ways we give and care. We are a giving place.

Today, we commit our annual pledges as a prayer of thanks for the abundance God has given us. Later, we celebrate this abundance with a Harvest Feast, a great tradition brought to the Cathedral years ago from the West Indian community, and revived today in gratitude for God's gifts. Thank you.

Jesus is coming here because we're rich. And, he's also coming because we're poor.

These poor ones in layers of dirty clothes, whose minds are ravaged by mental illness, pills and Vodka, these poor ones who wander from shelter to shelter, these very people who will come to us for food and clothes and a kind word today – *these are Jesus*.

Jesus is coming to feed *us*, to bring *us* back from the cold places in our hearts where we have strayed.

Just look what happened when Church Street Eats showed up in Bushnell Park on Saturdays with bagged lunches. We started feeding hungry people. Then our topsy-turvy God saw *our* hunger and served *us* up a feast – Church by the Pond, a brand new church. Now, the physically hungry and the spiritually hungry – all of us who are hungry - worship side-by-side, God's family in the reign of Christ, feasting at the table together on the abundance of the kingdom.

“Then, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on the throne of his glory and say to us all, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom. 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.”

So any time you sit down with your “Andrew” –like the young man from Burger King – whether it be in your family, your workplace, in the pew next to you, in the alley, in the park - think about this. He or she may be Jesus searching for you, opening your heart to compassion, bringing mercy to save you from yourself. And, you may be Jesus searching for Andrew.

With the Psalmist, we say:

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
go into his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and call upon his Name.*

*For the Lord is good;
his mercy is everlasting;
and his faithfulness endures from age to age.*

Amen