Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Today is the Reign of Christ Sunday, the image of Christ as the King. When I was a student at the U.S. Naval Academy I sang in the Chapel Choir. If you’ve never seen the Chapel there, it’s enormous, 193 feet from the floor to the top of the dome, and it’s like worshiping in a cathedral every Sunday. The Sunday Protestant service is very formal and stately. The choir processed and recessed in each service, rocking back and forth in what is known as “the Ecclesiastical sway,” and I I always felt very comforted by the whole thing. After a while, I realized that the service was designed around the worship of Christ as King. We may have shed our King in the United states when we established our democratic republic, but there is always an appeal to the idea that there is someone to reign over us, someone good who cares about our well-being, and even loves us. The words of our Psalm today echo this idea: “It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.” And this Psalm is the ultimate expression of thanks and praise for Christ’s reign over us.

But in our other scripture today, in Matthew 25:31-46, we see Christ as the King, but also as the Judge, and not everybody there is a sheep…some are goats. This Judge is presiding over a bench trial so there is no jury. It’s in an interesting courtroom, because there is no evidence presented, nor arguments made for guilt or innocence. In each instance, all the facts of each case are fully known to the Judge. This hearing is only, to use court parlance, the reading of the verdict and a sentencing. Why is the Christ the King the Judge and not God the Father? Jesus tell us himself in John 5:22, “[the Father] has given [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”

In another scripture that may seem contradictory to today’s lesson, some translations of the Bible specifically mention judgment in the words of Jesus found in John 3:16-18: “[16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. [18] The one who believes in Him is not judged…” (NASB) But in our passage from Matthew, which are also the words of Jesus, he is very clearly presented as a Judge.

It’s important to note that there are several ways of approaching this scripture. In this passage the presence of the judgment fuels “works-salvation” arguments, the vague idea that if you are a good person you will go to heaven. Because our nation is an amalgam of faiths including Judaism which does not have grace through faith in the same way as Christianity, this concept of ‘be a good person and go to heaven’ has permeated our society to the point that some call it “The National Secular Religion” of the United States.

So if Jesus tells us Christians are are not to be judged, why is there a judgment? In his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, John Wesley says of Matthew 25:35, “All these works of outward mercy suppose faith and love, and must needs be accompanied with works of spiritual mercy.” As the United Methodist Sermon notes for today point out, “Wesley is telling us that these works are not the admission price to God’s kingdom; they are the fruit of our salvation, the result of the work of God’s grace and love upon our hearts.” This, of course, is consistent with John Wesley's emphasis on holiness. In an article in *Ecclesiology*, Philip Fellows tells us that for Wesley, holiness is ‘religion itself,’ consisting of the righteousness of Christ

imparted to the believer by grace, through faith. He believed that OUR belief inclines us toward righteousness, not through the priggish stuffiness often associated with righteousness, but with genuine actions resulting from our righteous state. Having experienced Divine love, the believer is freed to choose to do what is right. The purpose of John and Charles Wesley's Methodist movement was to ‘spread scriptural holiness throughout the land,’ and Wesley once pointed out that there was no holiness but social holiness. The actions described by the Judge in our reading certainly constitute acts of social holiness. Caring for the needy is not salvation by works but acts of repentance that demonstrate an individual’s right relationship with God through Christ.

It’s interesting that some Christians make the argument that only Christians are judged in this scene. This makes sense in some contexts, because there’s no test of belief. The Judge doesn’t ask anyone “Do you trust that God will grant you salvation through your belief in Jesus Christ?” There are no catechism questions. No one is asked if they invited Jesus into their heart or had been born again, or even baptized. It’s all about actions. These folks make the assumption, given that there’s no winnowing of believers from unbelievers, that all the unbelievers are just somehow automatically going to eternal punishment. So what are we left with for those who believe this this? ***Some who claim the name of Christian don’t make the cut***. God will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. He says to the “goats” ‘[41]…You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, [42] for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, [43] I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ These folks, it would seem to me, should be ‘so-called Christians;’ are folks who believe that social justice and empathy are sins, and that the poor are poor, are hungry and naked, because it's their own damned fault, and if they could could just apply themselves and lift themselves up by their bootstraps, they’d be successful. And the people in prison? Well, they’re just bad and deserve what’s coming to them. The sick? Hey, we can make a lot of money off of the sick, they’re kind of a captive audience because it’s pay or die. Welcoming strangers? Absolutely not, because they're not like us…they just have to go back where they came from. Yet oddly enough, many folks seem to feel that they are somehow “doing their Christian duty” by holding these positions, and that because Jesus is a blue-eyed white man like they saw in their Sunday School pictures, clearly God favors white people. Somehow despite claiming the title marking them as followers of Jesus, the words of Jesus seem to mean little to them, because not only do they ignore this passage of the Bible, but the Beatitudes as well, and that totally crazy idea of loving your neighbor as you love yourself. <sigh> Well, at least they’re goats, and despite their delusions, goat in the case clearly does not stand for the “greatest of all times.”

So let’s loop back for a moment and look at who is being judged. OK, so in John 3, Jesus says that we as believers in the saving grace of Jesus Christ ARE NOT JUDGED. We know our God is a merciful God. So there is the distinct possibility that the King is not judging us, because he promised us he wouldn't, and instead is judging the rest of humanity. **Guess what?** Some of them showed others the same mercy as God, and because of that Jesus says to them “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” They’re surprised, because Jesus tells them “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, [36] 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.” And they’re confused, because honestly, here’s Jesus who came in his glory and all the angels with him, sitting on the throne of his glory right in front of them, and they don’t

remember doing any of that for him. But he tells them that since they showed mercy to others, they will receive mercy…and He has the power to do that! I had a colleague at work who was an atheist, but she was one of the best, most ethical people I have ever known, genuinely expressing love to her fellow human beings, and I told her one day that even though she might not believe in God, God believed in her, and because she believed so passionately in love and justice, that the merciful God of grace I believe in would never punish her, and that someday I’d see her in heaven. Matthew 25:31 to 46 is why I would say that. But the goats? The King, the Judge, makes it very clear that they care about no one but themselves, and will not enter the presence of God. You and I have always suspected that some people are just bad people, and Jesus knows that for sure. Some folks view this perspective on Matthew 25, the salvation of those who might or might not be believers in God, or who believe in God in other contexts, as heretical, but in doing so they are limiting God. Why? Why would you want to tell God what God can or can’t do? The God of infinite love and grace? That God? Not me, that’s for sure.

John Wesley always, always believed that our redemption though God’s love enabled us to strive to be holy, and that the only holiness is social holiness. This holiness is not done to please God but rather springs from and follows our faith. But this certainly doesn’t mean we shouldn't strive to that holiness, because that striving is a direct reflection of God’s love for us. We don’t feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner out of fear of judgment, but as an expression of the righteousness of Christ imparted to us by grace, through faith.

Let’s close with prayer:
Dear Lord, always help us to do your will and to remember that whatever we do for the least among us, we do for you. We thank you for the grace you pour out on us, and ask your aid in our always pouring out that same grace out on others in our lives. Amen