



I

Over many decades, the little magazine Reader's Digest has been a reliable source of humor drawn from everyday life. In one issue several years ago a nurse wrote in to tell about what was then a new piece of equipment. The nurse worked in a gynecologist's office and they were beginning to use a battery-operated device called a mini-dop on expectant mothers to listen to the heartbeat of their babies. The problem with these early devices was that sometimes they picked up interference from the radio or television set in the waiting room. What one doctor discovered quite to his dismay was that these devices could also pickup CB radio signals.

Imagine his surprise when one day he had the device to the abdomen of one of his patients when a voice came through as clear as day. The voice asked, "How are things out there?" Life is full of surprises.

Jesus tells us that there will come a time when the saints of God will be surprised. And it will be wonderful. It will be at the final judgment. On that momentous day, says Jesus, the King of all creation will come to His saints and here is what He will say something they were not expecting:

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

And here is how the King of all creation will answer: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

It's like a charming Christmas legend that comes out of medieval times. According to the legend, on Christmas Eve the Christ Child wanders throughout the world looking for places where he will be welcomed. Those who love him those who hope he will visit their homes demonstrate this by placing lighted candles in the window to invite him in. No one knows what he will look like when he comes. He might be a beggar. He might be blind. He might come as a poor and lonely child. So devout Christians welcome into their homes everyone who knocks on their door on Christmas Day. To turn anyone away may mean rejecting the Christ Child

We welcome the King.

It was one of those events that you can never forget witnessing. A skyscraper was going up. Hundreds of people paused daily to glance up at it.

One day they watched as a giant metal beam was raised to be placed high on the enormous steel skeleton of the skyscraper. And then something terrifying occurred. As the girder came near, a workman leaned out from the sixteenth floor to seize it. The spectators gasped as he lost his balance and fell. Fortunately, he was able to clutch the end of the giant beam that was being raised with both his arms and legs.

The ground crew stopped the hoisting engine so the man could continue to hold on, but the man's weight situated on one end began to tilt the beam to a vertical position, which would surely cause him to lose his grasp and fall to a his death.

Just when all seemed lost, something else occurred that seemed almost miraculous to the onlookers below. Without pause, another worker on the same floor, seeing his friend's predicament, leaped through space and landed on the other end of the girder,

where his weight leveled the beam. Amid the applause of the crowd, both men were safely lowered to the street. (1)

It pays to have a friend in high places, doesn't it? Someone who will literally risk his life to save yours? Of course, it pays to have friends in high places--even if they never risk much in your behalf. What is it we say? It's not what you know . . . it's who you know that counts.

It reminds me of the story about the little boy who came home from the playground with a bloody nose, a black eye, and torn clothes. It was obvious he'd been in a fight and lost. While his father was patching him up, he asked his son what happened.

"Well, Dad," he said, "I challenged Larry to a duel, and I gave him his choice of weapons."

"Uh-huh," said the father, "that seems fair."

"I know," said the boy, "but I never thought he'd choose his big brother!" (2)

You know where I'm heading, don't you? Thank God, we have a big brother! Thank God we have a Friend in the highest place possible.

Today is the last Sunday in the church year. Next Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, begins a new calendar for the church year. Next week we begin preparing for Christ's coming and we celebrate his birth; then, in the following months, we move through his life, death and resurrection, then to his ascension to be with the Father, then the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church; then we have the Sundays following Pentecost; and now we are about to begin the cycle all over again. This Sunday is referred to as Christ the King and in a fitting way to climax all that Christ means to us, we celebrate his exalted role at the right hand of the Father, "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come," as Paul writes in Ephesians 1.

In other words, we have a "big brother," or, if you will, a Friend in the highest regions of heaven. you and I have a friend in the highest place possible--at the right hand of God.

Today I want to focus for just a few moments on why Jesus is so important to us.

There are two hundred and fifty-six names given for Jesus in the Bible. Sunday imagined that this was because Christ is infinitely beyond all that any one name could express.

I believe that is true and, of course, I could never in one sermon explore all the grandeur of Christ.

First of all, we celebrate Christ as our King because he reveals to us the very nature of God. He reveals that nature in his teaching, and he reveals that nature in his own life.

The Hebrew Bible uses beautiful, poetic language to describe the majesty of God.

But did you know that, according to scholars, Jesus was the first person to actually call God *Abba*, Father? As you know, *Abba* can be translated as a term of intimacy,

"Daddy." Jesus would pray, "Abba, Father . . . everything is possible for you."

A great New Testament scholar noted, "There is no instance of the use of 'Abba' as an address to God in all the extensive prayer-literature of Judaism . . ." There is no record of somebody doing that before Jesus did. (3)

The Hebrew Bible tells us many wonderful things about God, but it never calls God *Abba*. Only Christ was that audacious. He taught us that God is like a loving Father who never turns His back on His children. Indeed, because of Jesus we have come to know that God's very nature is love.

A little girl who, when she was confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament, felt called upon to offer some explanation in defense of God. She said: "That happened before God became a Christian." (4) I like that. If we could discern in the Old Testament a perfect representation of God's character, there would have been no need for Christ. But the representation of God's character in the Old Testament is a mixed bag. In some places, He is a tender shepherd, but, in other places, He calls for innocent people to be slaughtered. Christ's life and teachings present a fuller of God altogether. We see in Christ's life and death *agape* love being lived out--love that is unconditional and never-ending. We see God as love and now understand the Old Testament vision of tough love in God. And then he makes this audacious statement, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). That is, you don't have to deduce God's nature from his teachings alone. All you have to do is to look at Christ's life.

But there is another reason this day is so important to us: In his death on the cross Christ made it possible for us to have new life in him. He died that we may live. Story about Czar Nicholas I of Russia. The czar had a good friend who asked him to provide a job for his son. And so the czar appointed the son as a paymaster in the Russian army.

This was a position of responsibility. Unfortunately the son was a gambler and lost nearly all the money entrusted to his care. Then word came that the auditors were coming to examine the young man's records.

The young man realized that he owed a huge debt--far greater than he could ever repay. And so he decided to take the coward's way out. At midnight he would use his pistol to end his life. Before committing this act, however, he wrote out a full confession, listing all he had stolen. He ended his confession with these words: "A great debt. Who can pay?" Then he fell asleep, weary from his exertions.

Late that night, the czar himself paid a surprise visit to the barracks and noticed a light on in the young man's room. The czar found the young man asleep with the letter of confession next to him. He read the letter and instantly understood what the young man had done. Then the czar did something quite stunning. He bent over, wrote one word on the bottom of the letter, and left.

When the young man woke up, it was past midnight. He took up his gun in order to follow through with his plan to end his life, when he noticed that someone had written something on the suicide note beneath his final words, "A great debt. Who can pay?" The one word was actually a signature: "Nicholas."

Checking his records, he realized that the signature was genuine. The czar knew what he had done and was willing to pay the huge debt himself. "A great debt. Who can pay?" "Nicholas."

"Resting on the words of his commander-in-chief, [the young man] fell asleep. In the morning a messenger came from the palace with the exact amount the young man owed. Only the czar could pay. And the czar did pay." (6)

We don't understand just how Christ's death on the cross atones for our sins. Different theologians have their own theories. But we do know this: God's grace and forgiveness are at the very heart of the Gospel. St. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also

through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death . . . When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”

Christ not only revealed to us the nature of God, but in his death on the cross Christ made it possible for us to have new life in him. When we stand at the foot of the cross and look at his hands and feet which were pierced in our behalf, we know just how much God loves us and we are led to live for Him.

But one thing more needs to be said: Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is our constant companion today as we seek to live for him.

Years ago author

Often he would suggest they walk with him from his office down to the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas. He describes this portrayal of Atlas as a beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. “There he is,” would say to a friend who was struggling, “the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden.

“Now that’s one way to live,” he would point out to his companion, “trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me.”

Then walk them across Fifth Avenue to Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. There behind the high altar of that great cathedral is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand. “We have a choice,” “We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, ‘I give up, Lord; here’s my life. I give you my world, the whole world.’” (7)

What a simple but beautiful reminder of a choice we make everyday--to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders or to yield that burden to our friend who sits at the right hand of God.

Knowing that Jesus is on our side should surely be enough to make us winners in the game of life. We have a champion, a big brother, a friend in high places who will accompany us into any battle, help us carry any burden, even give his life for us. Don’t give in or give up. After all, you have a friend in the highest of all places. His name? Jesus the Christ--King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

1. Contributed. Source: WITandWISDOM(tm) .

2. George W. Knight, *Hilarious Clean Jokes, Anecdotes, and One-Liners* (Kindle Edition).

3. John Ortberg, <http://www.mppc.org/index.php?q=learn/sermons>.

4. Vol. 1 (Westminster Press, 1956), pg 16. Cited by The Rev. Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, http://day1.org/1187-a_permanent_glimpse_of_god.

5. http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_the_word_became_flesh.htm.

6. Dr. Ray Pritchard, <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1998-12-20-When-Did-Christmas-Begin/>.

7. Power Books (1982).

8. Shaun Biakeney and Wallace Henley, *Energy Zappers: Dealing with People Who Drain You Dry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

II



Like it or not, judgment is a fact of life. That is true whether we are talking about the histories of nations or the events of our own personal life. If we break the law, then society will judge us. If we live immorally drink too much, engage in sexual promiscuity, live a lifestyle of constant stress then our bodies will judge us. We simply cannot escape judgment in life.

Jesus rarely spoke about the final judgment, but on one occasion he did paint a picture for us in one of his stories. The parable that I just read gives a strong jolt to those who are heavy on doctrine but short on ethics.

A shepherd divides the sheep from the goats, said Jesus, so too shall there be a great division on the final day. Those on the right hand will be allowed entrance into the kingdom, while those on the left will be denied it. And the great surprise is that those who thought they were religious turn out to be not as good as they thought, and those who thought they failed were told they did a better job than they supposed.

I would like to suggest three points that this parable is attempting to make this morning.

I

First, the parable suggests that we are to view each individual as though he or she was Christ himself. “Lord, when did we feed you, or clothe you, or visit you in prison?” was the question that was asked. Came the response: When you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.”

There is an old children’s story, one that perhaps most of you have heard. The Knight’s aide advised the mayor of a small village that his majesty was going to be making a visit to their humble little village. With great fanfare the mayor began to make the appropriate arrangements. On the day of the arrival the mayor, dressed in his finery, waited in joyful anticipation. The hours slowly ticked away but no one ventured into the village. No one, that is, except a lonely lame beggar who asked the mayor for a drink to quince his thirst. Irritatingly he brushed him aside. He had no time for dredges such as this, for he was waiting for the King. Yet, at the end of the day the mayor stood alone; the King had never arrived. Furiously he wrote the King’s aide asking what had gone wrong, only to be told that the King had indeed passed through his village that day. The aide said, “He was traveling incognito.” He had come in the disguise of a lonely lame beggar.

Who is Christ? Christ is everyman. And there will be those who say, “But master if we had only known that it was you we would have responded.” That is precisely the point. If

the Bethlehem innkeeper had known that Mary was carrying within her womb the long awaited Messiah, no doubt he would have made room for them on that fateful night. If the Sanhedrin had known that it was God they were arresting on that fateful night in the Gethsemane garden, no doubt they would followed him. Our goodness must be uncalculating. If we do a kind act simply because we think that it will assist us in gaining entrance into heaven, then our motivation was not love but selfishness.

II

Secondly, the parable suggests that in the end the criteria by which we shall all be judged will be simple acts of kindness. In the story the King allows entrance into his kingdom not by affiliation with any particular religious group, or fame, or fortune, or credential that might be listed in an obituary. No, the final judgment is based upon how kind an individual was: feeding those who were hungry, showing concern for those in prison, taking care of those who did not have sufficient clothing.

Who would ever have thought that such simple acts would carry so much weight on the final day? Who would ever believe that a man would be judged for what we view as slight oversights? When we think of divine judgment we think of a few life-making decisions, but according to this story judgment comes every single day in the little commonplace things that we do or we do not do. Piety, orthodoxy, sound theologies do not count for everything. Jesus is saying that the main business that we are in is the business of kindness, and it is this criterion by which God will view our life. Ignore the law of kindness and we perish.

I always remember fondly the movie Sound of Music. At the beginning we find Baron Van Trapp ruling his household with an iron fist. Every time he blows a shrill whistle the children come marching out of their bedrooms like well-seasoned troops. He then turns to Maria, the new governess, and curtly informs her that her signal on the whistle will indicate thus and such. She very quickly informs him that she does not answer to whistles. She introduces a new mood and slowly the children begin to respond to her and the house is transformed from a military barracks into a home. Of course, you cannot miss the point. It is kindness that has won the day.

Of course, there is a drawback in kindness. Kindness means nurturing and nurturing takes time. Blowing a whistle will get you a more immediate result. But in the end shouting and ultimatums will never win the day. The Apostle Paul admonished the church at Ephesus: "Stop being mean, bad tempered and angry. Instead, be ye kind to one another, even as God has forgiven you because you belong to Christ Jesus."

III

Third, this parable suggests that in the end we are judged not on the bad that we do, but the good that we do not do. Those on the left hand of the King were denied entrance into the Kingdom. Why? Because he said, I was thirsty and you gave me no water, I was in prison and you never came to see me, I was without clothes and you never gave me any.

We think of divine judgment as opposite of this. We think that the thing that will get us into heaven is by refraining from certain sins. Conversely we think sin will send us to hell. A religious person is one who does not smoke, does not drink, does not curse. That misses the point, my friends.

There are many in church who are fine, decent respectable people who are not doing anything for Christ. Jesus told the story about a man who took a thousand dollars and buried it. Why did Jesus condemn him? Not because he gambled it away, not because he frivolously spent it, but because he did nothing with it. Those on the left hand side were kept out of the Kingdom of God, not because of what they did but because of what they failed to do. In the old catholic language, It was not sins of commission, but sins of omission.

I like the story behind a man named Henry Dunant. He was born to wealthy parents in Switzerland in 1828. A deeply compassionate man, he devoted considerable time assisting and encouraging young people, especially the poor. At about eighteen years of age, he founded a Young Men's Christian Union.

In 1859, at the age of 30, Dunant was traveling in northern Italy. He had only one object in view to get the support of the Emperor of France for a business project in Algeria. But the Emperor, Napoleon III, was busy driving the Austrians out of Northern Italy.

Arriving on the day of the Battle of Solferino, Dunant could not believe what he saw. That day the French victory over the Austrians left 40,000 dead, dying and wounded scattered over a bloody terrain for the vermin and vultures to consume.

Dunant never did see the Emperor but what he did see changed him and the world forever. He joined in the work of relief, sent his horse drawn coach to bring supplies, and wrote to his friends in Switzerland for aid. He labored for three days at this horrible task. Then he returned home and he began writing. He made an appeal against the terrifying inhumanity he had witnessed. He hoped he could influence people to prevent or to reduce the suffering of soldiers. The result of his writings was a book: A Memory of Solferino (Un Souvenir de Solferino), printed in Geneva in October 1862. This famous book, mailed by the author to influential people throughout Europe, excited them beyond all expectation.

In the last chapter of his book he made some proposals on make-shift hospitals, trained volunteers, and the necessity for international cooperation. Finally, five years later, at the Geneva Convention of 1864 sixteen nations signed accords-modeled on Dunant's proposals, acknowledging the neutrality of medical personnel in times of hostility. For their banner and symbol they chose a white flag with a red cross. And so the Red Cross was born!

III Fr Joseph Pellegrino

*For the Kingdom and the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.
Amen.*

This flourish was put into the margin next to the Lord's Prayer in *Matthew* by one of the inscribers of the Middle Ages. In the days before the printing press, the only copies of books were produced by monks who spent long days meticulously reproducing the texts set before them. These men prayed over what they were writing. The monk who wrote the flourish wanted to place a prayer next to what he was copying. He wanted to share what his soul was crying out. He wanted the world to know that God was the one and only king, the supreme king. He wanted the world to know that Jesus Christ had come to establish the Kingdom of God in this world.

This kingdom was different from any the world had ever seen. It was a kingdom of charity, a kingdom of love, a kingdom whose least members would be valued and cared for. And so, at the conclusion of the 25th chapter of *Matthew*, we have the story of the sheep and the goats. This seemingly simple story leads us to a profound meditation on the fundamental nature of the Kingdom of God on earth, the Church.

First, the Church is not just a humanitarian organization. The Church is the Body of Christ on earth. It looks to serve Christ and to be Christ in every area of its life. Humanitarians are concerned with the good of their fellow men. This is wonderful. The world has certainly benefitted from the determination of so many rich individuals and couples who have given a great deal of their wealth for worthy causes. God sees them. God will reward them.

But what we do in the Church is far more than humanitarian. We seek the very presence of the Lord in those who are hurting. When He tells the sheep that they will be rewarded or the goats that they will be condemned, the Lord does not just say that those who are suffering are important to Him. No, He identifies Himself with them. He says, "I was hungry; I was thirsty; I was naked; I was a stranger; I was sick; I was in prison." Our charity is not just something we do. It is our caring for the presence of Jesus Christ in those with profound needs. We are Christians, servants of the One who identifies Himself with the marginalized.

Secondly, we cannot be satisfied just with encouraging the government to care for all who are suffering. Yes, we must do that. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is correct in its efforts as lobbyists in Washington, DC. It is patriotic for the Church to demand that our government be just and moral. But efforts to change the laws of the country do not supplant our responsibility to care for the weakest of our society ourselves. Whether the country is just or unjust, we must always be charitable.

Thirdly, we must respond to what we have received from the Lord. We have received mercy. We have received reconciliation. We have received acceptance as sons and daughter of God. It is a challenge for us to live out the gratitude we owe

God. We demonstrate our gratitude in the way in which we treat those who are abandoned in the world today.

What is often called the preferential option for the poor is then something we undertake not out of a sense of duty, but out of a sense of gratitude for the extraordinary gift of God's love. Love is amazing. We receive love only by giving love. We receive God's love by sharing his love with others, particularly with those people with whom Jesus Christ has said he is present in a special way.

Our American society is suffering from extreme polarization: liberals vs conservatives, Republicans vs Democrats. Each side sees little good in the other side and little wrong in their side. Many people, including Catholics, are identifying themselves with political parties and political ideals. This is wrong. The Lord did not call us into a political party. He called us into the Kingdom of God. The way we need to identify ourselves is as authentic followers of Jesus Christ. When we do that, then we will find ourselves supporting various positions of each party because these positions best represent the one party we need to belong to, the party of Jesus Christ.