

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King – November 26, 2017/Year A
The Reverend Elizabeth Masterson

When Marianne Budde, the Bishop of the Diocese of Washington, was consecrated six years ago, she spoke about her experience of God's call to her. When she was a young woman, she had questioned whether she had the potential and ability to do something meaningful with her life. Someone she trusted gently confronted her with these words, “You are the unique expression of God's creative genius.” And then her friend suggested that Mariann stop doubting herself and get to work on what she believes God was calling her to do.

Truly amazing things can happen in the lives of folks who come to understand how they are the “unique expression of God’s creative genius.” We can see this in our Epistle and Gospel readings this morning. Let us begin by exploring St. Paul's letter to the Christian community in Ephesus. Then we will use what we have understood in the Epistle to discover how we can live into the Gospel message.

The Epistle to the Ephesians describes the gift that God's creative genius bestows on each of us. Paul calls it “a spirit of wisdom and revelation.” He prays that all the people in the church at Ephesus receive this gift from God. This spirit of wisdom and revelation isn't something that will set them on some sort of spiritual pedestal. Rather this spirit will help them to see more clearly with “the eyes of their heart.” These eyes are to behold God's call to us in three ways—our hope in God's coming reign, our understanding that what God offers us outshines all that the world might promise us, and our taking comfort in God's great power in our lives—our comfort comes from knowing that we are not alone as we confront life's difficulties and that we can be at peace with ourselves and with other people. All this comes to us through Christ who was, is and always will be the most perfect example of God's creative genius.

If the “eyes of our heart” are watching for Christ as we try to live in this “spirit of wisdom and revelation,” what will we see? This morning's gospel reading from Matthew offers one answer. We will see opportunities for service: for Jesus said, “I was hungry, you gave me food, I was thirsty 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.”

When we hear this passage, we may wonder if Matthew's theology represents a point of view called “works righteousness.” “Works righteousness” claims that by doing certain holy or righteous actions we can earn salvation. It claims that in the age to come, we will be judged only by what we have done or failed to do. Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century spoke out against this, because the church had carried this point of view to its corrupt extreme. By paying for masses to be said in the name of your departed loved one, you helped them out: sins committed in life, but not absolved, could be expiated after death—and your loved ones’ time in purgatory shortened. Salvation became a commodity.

I believe we should look at this gospel passage in a different way. What Matthew tells

us by reporting this story about sheep and goats, about those who respond to those in need and those who don't, is this: salvation, defined as eternal life in the presence of God's love, comes as a natural consequence when we compassionately respond to the pain and suffering in our world—just as Jesus responded to them. Jesus defined the life of service he lived and expected his followers to live, when he said: “. . . just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

But sometimes we fall short in “seeing with the eyes of our hearts;” we miss the mark and fail to realize that the people with whom we live and work—and even our neighbors all over the world—are “unique expressions of God's creative genius.” Sometimes we ignore people and their needs in our haste to deal with the preoccupations that crowd our lives.

Let's remember the some Gospel accounts in which Jesus declares harsh judgment: such as, the foolish bridesmaids who had not brought enough oil were shut out of the wedding banquet; such as the hypocritical religious authorities who demanded the best seats in the synagogue and at banquets, but who will be last in the God's kingdom; and such as the servant who angered his master by burying the talent he had been given and was cast into a dark place. Even when parables illustrate Jesus' use of hyperbole to make his point, these parables can still be heard as severe warnings for Jesus' listeners—and for us as well. These warnings help us remember our continuing need to examine our motives and our behavior.

When we ponder today's reading from Matthew 25, we should think: Are we responding to others with the compassion and love Jesus would show them? And when we haven't—when we ignore those people who need our attention and assistance—and of course at times we will—do we then recognize our need for God's forgiveness? Do we accept, too, our need for God's grace to turn away from our sinfulness and begin anew? This, indeed, is the hope to which we have been called; this, indeed, is our glorious inheritance with the saints; this, indeed, is the power of God for each of us—that God will never give up on anyone! For everyone—each one of us—is a unique expression of God's creative genius.