Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the day we say good-by to the season of Pentecost. The green season. Here in the Northern Hemisphere, Pentecost spans the summer. For us it is the time of planting and pruning; steady growth; and ultimately: the harvest. The concept of “harvest” pertains both to the landscape out there and the landscape within! On this final Sunday of Pentecost, the Church gives us an image of what to expect when harvest time comes for our souls.

You’ve probably heard about “the dash.” It’s the mark on a tombstone separating the major dates of one’s life: birth and death. A mere dash represents our entire life; a hyphen chiseled in stone. A poem was written about it that says:

It matters not, how much we own,  
the cars; the house; the cash.  
It matters how we live and love  
and how we spend our dash.

How are you spending your dash? Are you growing in God; in Christ, like fertile crops in the summer? Or is life crushing you right now? Crushing times come to all of us, be it health issues or family issues or anything else that breaks our spirits. We can feel what the prophet Ezekiel describes in our first reading: being pushed with flank and shoulder; being butted with horns; being forcibly scattered from a place of safety and love.

But this is a judgment text. So is the reading about separating the sheep from the goats. And yet, even in the midst of judgment, there is comfort. That is rather the point of judgment! Because in God’s eyes when we fail to offer comfort to those burdened by life, we have failed. The dash on our tombstone is meaningless.

Ezekiel quotes God as saying, “I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” That sounds ominous: “I will feed them with justice.” Those who oppress and abuse and gain benefit at the expense of others will be fed with justice. In other words, they will reap what they have sown. That’s only fair.

God will feed them with justice. God will also strengthen the weak. The weak are the ones with whom Jesus identifies; the ones who either have suffered from injustice, or the ones into whose lives hardships have come. He catalogs those hardships: “I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, naked, sick; in prison. You welcomed me, clothed me, took care of me and visited me.”

This is a cosmic vision in which Jesus aligns himself with the suffering of the world. This is a cosmic vision in which Jesus aligns himself with *us* when we suffer.

I remember a time of deep heartache in my life. I went to church. Someone I barely knew but who knew of my situation offered me comfort. But then she said, “Help someone else. Even in your misery, tend to the pain of others.”

It was remarkable advice. I took it. I believe it helped me cope with my own difficulties and hastened my healing and recovery from a bad time.

When we don’t respond to the suffering of others, there is divine consequence. We miss God. And then we ponder and protest, saying: “Where is God in my life?”

There’s a story about Mother Theresa having a hard go of it one day. She was on the streets of Calcutta, checking on the destitute and the orphans, as she always did. She came across a homeless man. He was, to say the least, irascible – contrary, disagreeable, impolite, difficult – if you've ever done any charitable work in soup kitchens or homeless shelters, you've met this man many times over. After the encounter Mother Theresa prayed: "Lord Jesus! What an interesting way you have chosen to appear to me today!"

Jesus aligns himself with those who suffer. When we don’t respond to them, we miss God.

But we say: “We never saw *you* hungry, thirsty, sick or in jail.” The implication being that if we saw you, dear Jesus, in such straits, we’d jump to it. Jesus says, “Jump to it anyway because I am in all those who suffer. They are made in the divine image. Their spirits contain divine spark.” And we think, yeah, but aren’t they at least somewhat responsible for their own suffering? And besides all that, they are just so darn ungrateful when I offer food, drink, welcome or care.

This is hard. I know it’s hard. I struggle to keep my eyes open and not look away from anguish. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not easy. It’s much easier to admire Jesus than to follow him. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes it like this:

“The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. The one who admires is inexhaustible in words, phrases, songs, about how highly he prizes Christ. But the admirer renounces nothing, gives up nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not become what he admires.”

Becoming what we admire is what the long growing season of Pentecost is all about. Today, at its end, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. This is a relatively new feature of the church calendar being less than 100 years old. It was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius the Eleventh at a time when God seemed to be losing ground. The devastation of World War One was still apparent; nationalism seemed to have been fostered by war, not curtailed; and secularism was rising rapidly. The Feast of Christ the King was meant to encourage Christians whose faith had taken a beating and to remind the world that we Christians have a king who transcends nations, politics and war.

Christ is no king of this realm. His kingdom has no boundaries or lines on a map. He is only king in our hearts. We make this lowly one king when we allow him to rule our minds by his teachings. We make him king when we persistently, consistently return to him and yield to his love.

Christian mystic Richard Rohr says we have to let love happen. We have to agree with love. We cannot “get there” or attain love, we can only be with love. Rohr likens it to pushing the river. You don’t have to push the river; it flows on its own. Just be in the river.

Love is like prayer; it is not so much an action that we do but a reality that we already are. We don’t decide to “be loving.” The Father doesn’t decide to love the Son. The Son does not choose now and then to love the Father, or the Spirit. Love is not something you do; love is someone you are. It is your True Self. Love is where you came from and love is where you’re going.

When you seek and stand in love’s river, the dash of your life will be tremendous!

Amen.