I have, on a bookshelf at home, three porcelain cups that belonged to my mother. One of them commemorates Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee in 1977, which marked 25 years since Elizabeth took the throne of England. Another is in honor of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the 60th anniversary in 2012 of her ascension. The third cup is fancier. It features a portrait of smiling Prince Charles and Princess Diana. There is a crown floating near the top of Charles' head and below the couple are these words, “To commemorate the birth of their first child, HRH Prince William of Wales, 21st June, 1982.” I grew up with such knickknacks around the house, since my British mother never lost her fascination with the royal family of her homeland. It is a fascination shared by many in this country and which intensified when a beautiful young woman named Diana married the Queen's son and breathed new life into the stodgy tradition of Buckingham Palace. How many of us got up at 5:00 in the morning to watch the wedding of Charles and Diana? And how many of us delighted in the birth of her beautiful sons?

We don't have anything quite like the royals in our country, so sometimes we “borrow” the British royal family. We marvel at their palaces, their designer clothing and ceremonial costumes, their beautiful children and grandchildren. And, because we yearn for such pomp ourselves, we set about creating our own kind of royalty. We make queens and kings out of actors and actresses, musicians, athletes and politicians. We follow them on social media, admire their wealth, their talent and their power. We hold them up on a higher plain than that on which we live and we expect them to thrill and delight us, to take us, if just for a moment, out of the day-to-day ordinariness of our lives. And they do, sometimes, until the veneer of these pseudo-royals begins to crack, until they reveal themselves to be human – vulnerable, selfish, drunk on power, able, and sometimes even willing, to use it to disastrous results.

Today we celebrate the reign of Christ and are reminded of the one who has all power over heaven and earth, complete and total rule over your life and mine. Jesus shatters all notions of what a king should be. Our king is born in a stable; he lives as a traveling preacher and is at the mercy of strangers to offer him a meal and a bed in which to sleep each night. His crown is not made of gold and precious gems but of thorns. This king teaches peace to those who are often a threat or a breath away from war. He forgives the sins that burden peoples' souls. He is a compassionate healer, a reconciler and a bearer of a kind of love this world often cannot fathom or accept. This king of kings threatens those who hold earthly power and those who first knew of him killed him for messages like the one we hear today. But the father has given him power over all the earth. His words continue to frighten and anger many who claim rule over this world's nations.

This message of Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, contains judgment, to be sure. Jesus talks about separating people the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He promises eternal blessing on the sheep at his right hand and curses upon the goats at his left. Those who are blessed are those who give food to the hungry, something to drink to the thirsty, welcome to a stranger and clothing to one who has none. They care for the sick and visit those in prison. In so doing, they who do these things do them to Jesus, for he is in all those in need, in those he calls “the least of these.” Those who are cursed? They pass by the hungry and thirsty, ignore the stranger, give nothing to the naked and forget about the sick and imprisoned. “Are you a sheep or are you a goat?” Jesus seems to ask. “Where do you want to spend eternal life – by my side or in eternal punishment?”

Simple, right? Follow Jesus, do the right thing and our places in heaven will be secured. Except life isn't so simple. Life is not a snapshot of one moment in time and Jesus is not standing by ready to make his judgment on that single moment, on whether or not we happen to be doing as he wishes when he happens to be watching. In fact, Jesus' ultimate judgment was made long before you and I arrived on the scene. It came as he hung on a cross and took all the sins of all the generations past and to come into his body. In his resurrection, forgiveness and new life are his gift to us all. Every day brings a new chance for us to live fully in his love. But, as it turns out, sometimes we are the sheep at Jesus' right hand and sometimes we are the goats. Sometimes we see the need around us and respond to it with compassion. Sometimes we ignore what we see because doing something about it would require more than we are willing to give. Sometimes we don't see it at all, so enmeshed are we with the inner workings of our own lives. Always, Jesus is ready to transform us – you and me – to lift us out of our self-absorption, out of our fascination with power and wealth and all that glitters, and lead us into the ways in which he wants us to live.

When we pay attention to this Jesus, this radical unwordly King of Kings, we discover some basic truths. Jesus is drawn to those who are the least of this world, those who struggle on a daily basis to feed and shelter their families. He identifies with those who are in perpetual danger of being harmed or even killed because of their nationality or their religious beliefs or the color of their skin. Jesus seeks to heal those who are sick and befriend those who are lonely or forgotten. Jesus understands the pain and suffering all these children of his endure because they are the same suffering he experienced on this earth. When one of his loved ones hurts, he hurts. He alone has the power to change that, to ease suffering and bring peace to broken spirits. And he has chosen us to bear his love to those who don't know if they even dare to hope for it.

But you and I are sheep one day and goats the next. Why would Jesus choose us for such a holy task? He chooses us because he has the power to transform us, to infuse us with resurrection light and life. Jesus reminds us of how much he loves us, forgives us our sins, even all of our goat-moments, then grants us the great privilege of sharing all the saving goodness of his heart. A poet named Katherine Lee Bates paints a poignant picture of a powerful Savior, from the perspective of one is fortunate enough to follow him. Her poem is called “*Alone into the Mountain*.”

*All day from that deep well of life within*

*Himself has He drawn healing for the press*

*Of folk, restoring strength, forgiving sin,*

*Quieting frenzy, comforting distress.*

*Shadows of evening fall, yet wildly still*

*They throng Him, touch Him, clutch His garment's hem,*

*Fall down and clasp His feet, cry on him, till*

*The Master, spent, slips from the midst of them*

*And climbs the mountain for a cup of peace,*

*Taking a sheer and rugged track untrod*

*Save by a poor lost sheep with thorn-torn fleece*

*That follows on and hears Him talk of God.*

A poor lost sheep with thorn-torn fleece. That's what I feel like most of the time. Maybe you do, too. I try and try to do what I believe God has called me to do and I fail again and again. Most of the time I **am** lost and have no idea where I came from or where I am going. And yet...I catch a glimpse of the one who pours himself out for all who need him and see him climb the mountain for a cup of peace. He allows me to follow him – wants me to, I think – and so I climb that mountain behind him. And I hear him talk of God! The kingdoms of the earth fall away when I am before this King of Kings, when you are there as well. Together, we behold him. We hear him call our names and we follow him. Our eyes are opened to see him in the face of the stranger, hear him in the cry of the child, know him in despair of the hungry and lonely and afraid and the one in prison. We have the great privilige to go to them bearing the grace and mercy of Christ the King. He is the redeemer of this broken world and we are the sheep of his pasture. When we get lost and tangled in barbed wire and brambles, he sets us free to follow him again. And again. And again. And hear him talk of God.

Amen.

*Christ the King 2017*

*November 26, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 25:31-46*