

## **Caring for the Body of Christ**

*Matthew 25: 31-46; Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24*

A sermon preached at Duke University Chapel for Sunday morning worship on 22 November 2020  
Rev. Kathryn Lester-Bacon

Last spring, in the early days of the pandemic, my husband, Michael, and I would often pack up the car with our two young kids, a diaper bag, backpack carrier, hiking boots, changes of clothes, lunchboxes, and lots of wipes. Then, whether rain or shine or cold, we head out to West Point on the Eno for several hours. West Point on the Eno is a city park, so it remained open throughout the pandemic. Also, this park has 388 acres, so, with that large expanse, it was—and is—fairly easy to physically distance from other people.

These were the early days of the pandemic, when fatigue hadn't yet settled in, so people were truly trying to stay close to home when possible. If you saw another human being, it felt remarkable. In March and April, when we roamed the park, we would hardly see anyone there (except for a few other parents, also running out the energy of their young kids).

It was good to be at the park, out in nature, savoring the budding trees, the flowing creek, allowing our kids to run along paths in the woods. It was lovely to have those smells and sights nourishing our overwhelmed nerves.

One day we saw a trash truck coming around the corner of the parking lot. We always notice trash trucks these days because, with a three and two year old, any large vehicle is a very exciting event. However, on this day last spring, the truck driver also was one of the few people we had seen in-person that day.

The driver went to an overflowing trashcan alongside the parking lot. He did his job – got down from the truck, secured the unwieldy can to the truck's mechanical arm, had it hauled up, contents dumped, and then returned to its right place, safely tucked away from foot traffic and cars. He then drove off. My kids clapped and cheered as he drove past, the way they usually do. He honked and waved.

However, on this day, I found myself caught by a wave of emotion, stunned and teary. It hit me that while we were able to keep each other safe by working remotely, holding the kids out of school, seeking solace in an outdoor place, this man was still going in to work.

We were able to enjoy the park only because someone else was hauling away the trash. In the middle of a pandemic, this man still was tasked with the work of maintenance and care; and I was benefitting immensely from it.

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This pandemic is forcing us all to reconsider some of our social structures of maintenance and care. Churches have had to reimagine how to connect with parishioners who no longer pass through the pew or fellowship hall or handshake line. Our society has had to admit our dependence upon some workers, such as warehouse packers and delivery truck drivers, care nurses, cleaning crews, and customer service representatives. Without these workers, it is clear that our social functioning would slow to a chaotic crawl.

This reminds me of an article I came across two years ago, an article that compelled me then and convicts me now. Scholar Shannon Mattern, in [Places Journal](#), wrote a long piece titled “Maintenance and Care: A working guide to the repair of rust, dust, cracks, and corrupted code in our cities, our homes, and our social relation.” In it, Mattern points out that we don’t talk much about maintenance. We consider it an unexciting and an unprofitable topic of study. We as a society would much rather spend time, money, and energy discussing new ideas of innovation, invention, and entrepreneurship.<sup>1</sup>

I have had similar experiences in church work. I have sat on several committees for “New Worshiping Communities” or “1001 New Worshiping Communities.” I have participated in numerous workshops talking about how to initiate alternative worship experiences, such as pub church, dinner church, BBQ church, or Messy Church. These are worthwhile conversations to have.

Yet, when you are in a meeting regarding these new initiatives, and you ask, “who is going to maintain this after the founding pastor leaves?” or “what institution is going to buy the pastor’s health insurance?” you can hear the excitement shrivel.

Similarly, Mattern’s article convicted me with this rhetorical question: for all our social aspirations of innovation, what would happen to our cities, if we stopped maintaining our sewer lines? For all our rhetoric of self-reliance, what would happen to our rural communities if we stopped maintaining our roadways?

Innovation is not bad, but when separated from a concomitant discussion of maintenance, our conversation around both remains woefully incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon Mattern, “Maintenance and Care,” *Places Journal*, November 2018. Accessed 18 Nov 2020. <https://doi.org/10.22269/1811201>

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Today's scripture passages remind us of this; they are meant to put us in our place. These scriptures remind us that we are not the great creators, innovators, and saviors we like to imagine. We are not in charge and in control. In Ezekiel, God is saying, "You are not responsible for saving my sheep; I am." In the gospel, Christ is saying, "You are not in charge of judgment; I am."

We are not called to start the work of discipleship; rather, we are called to continue it, to *maintain* it, to seek to sustain it by finding the places where the Holy Spirit is already hard at work in the world.

We are not asked to create the body of Christ; instead, we are being commanded to tend to it, to care for it.

To value care rather than only invention, to give accolades to nurturing rather than just innovating, this requires a radical restructuring of our world's value systems.

Mattern also makes the connection between how we talk about maintenance and how we talk about care. She writes:

Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web." Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues that caring involves an "ethico-political commitment" to the neglected and oppressed and a concern with the affective dimensions of our material world. We care for things not because they produce value, but because they already have value.<sup>2</sup>

To care for something requires tending to it, nurturing it. Caring for something means paying close attention to how it works, how it functions, what it needs. We do not always value this ongoing work, this close attention that must continually be paid towards sustaining function.

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<sup>2</sup> Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care," *Places Journal*, November 2018. Accessed 18 Nov 2020. <https://doi.org/10.22269/181120>

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As another scholar writes, “maintenance falls outside of our current value creation system...so understanding and accounting for maintenance practices may undermine who or what we currently think to be important.”<sup>3</sup>

Our gospel passage speaks of this reality. It forces us to ask: to whom do we pay attention? Whose needs do we concern ourselves with? To whom do we ascribe authority? Whose power are we invested in maintaining?

The gospel of Matthew describes a kingdom where we care for people not because we believe that they can produce something valuable; we care for them because we believe they are inherently, essentially valuable.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This day is a recent addition to the church’s liturgical calendar, started in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. As Libby Howe quotes in a recent edition of *The Christian Century*, “Pope Pius XI instituted it in...a world that had been ravaged by the First World War...and had begun to bow down before the ‘lords’ of exploitative consumerism, nationalism, secularism, and new forms of injustice...Pope Pius envisioned a dominion by a King of Peace who came to reconcile all things, who came not to be served but to serve.”<sup>4</sup>

This day was started in the same year that Mussolini was taking over Italy, Hitler was consolidating his political party in Germany, 40,000 Klu Klux Klan members had just marched in Washington, and 7 years after a pandemic had decimated populations around the globe.

Christ the King Sunday is the day when we name Jesus with the most exalted title that we can imagine—King of All Nations. Yes, this title creates problems for its patriarchal and militaristic tone, but if we look at this title in relation to our text today, we can see how it actually resists and subverts the triumphalist value systems upon which we often build our culture. In the gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus say that he will be seated on a throne and then, in the same breath, he describes how the enthroned king is actually the hungry prisoner and the naked stranger in our midst right now. This is a radical restructuring of the way the world ascribes power and privilege.

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<sup>3</sup> Naomi Turner. “Why is maintenance so difficult to talk about?” Accessed 17 November 2020.

<https://festivalofmaintenance.org.uk/2020/08/13/why-is-maintenance-so-difficult-to-talk-about/>

<sup>4</sup> Howe, Libby. “Living By the Word.” *The Christian Century*. Published 27 October 2020. Accessed 17 November 2020.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/november-22-roc-matthew-2531-46>

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When we say, “Christ is King,” we are affirming that “God alone is worthy of allegiance.” In so doing, we push against the worldly seduction of supremacist hierarchies and authoritarian hero-worship.

When we see Christ on the throne, we must also confront how we might not have recognized Christ on the margins.

This passage makes us ask ourselves, when we have seen someone in need of care, how have we responded? How have we responded as individuals and as a community, as a nation?

For here is the most profound point to me: neither the nations on the king’s right or the ones on his left—neither the sheep or the goats—recognize the king when they cared for him. Both ask, “when did we see you?” Both need the king to explain the situation to them.

As one pastor describes it, this means:

[Those on the king’s right] have not been acting in some calculated way to earn God’s favor. They have simply been doing what comes naturally for them in caring for their neighbors in need. Their actions are a sign of their relationship with a loving and merciful God... [Those on the king’s left] are likewise surprised to learn that they have encountered him in the lowly and needy. They too have simply been doing what comes naturally — looking out for their own interests and not being bothered with the needs of others. This too is a sign of their relationship — or lack thereof — with the Son of Man. They simply do not know him or understand his way of love and mercy.<sup>5</sup>

This is a deeply important point: it is not that the sheep have built an effective system to identify who is worthy of aid and who is not. Rather, the sheep have built a community, which pays attention, sees the need around them and responds to it, without calculation or expectation or hope of remuneration.

The righteous ones do not live as if they can figure out where the worthy king is hidden among the prisoners; rather, they live as if each and every prisoner was already as worthy as a king.

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Elisabeth. “The Last Judgment.” *Working Preacher*. Published 7 April 2019. Accessed 17 November 2020. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/last-judgment-2/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46-5>

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Most of the people involved in this activism of mutual aid don't see what they are doing as remarkable or radical.

I learned this again on Thursday night when listening to the speakers for the Chapel's workshop on "Signs of Hope: Building a Movement." Alicia Crosby, a Duke Divinity student and justice educator, was one of the speakers. She shared how many of her family members—people that she had watched doing activism for years, whether organizing clothing drives or petitioning a landlord to keep a structure safe—wouldn't call themselves activist. They simply considered their work as caring for the community. They just thought they were treating people with worth and dignity.

Alicia said:

I think that sometimes, in justice-seeking work, people think that 'those people over there can do it.' ....But there are things in us that the Spirit endows us with and moves in us, where we are sensitive to certain issues, sensitive to the ways that people are impacted, and out of those sensitivities, we move, we respond...If there is nothing else I say to you tonight, that is one thing I want you to remember: it is about the little things. There are already ways you are engaged in this [justice-seeking, activist] work. I'm sure of it.<sup>6</sup>

Here is the good news for we who are Christians: we believe that Christ has already done the big things. We are not called to start or save this world, or to sort and judge our neighbors. That is not on our To-Do list. God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit has done this work of creating and redeeming the world. The beginning and the end are out of our hands.

What we are called to do now is care for the body of Christ here and now. Not just in the church, but also in the prisons, in the streets, in city council meetings and around kitchen tables, in all the nooks and crannies of our lives.

We are called to build communities that pay attention to the needs in our midst. We are called to the work of continual discernment and discipleship. We are called to resist the powers and principalities of the world, in declaring, "You do not have the final word." We are called to ask, "What if Jesus our Christ is here already?"

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<sup>6</sup> Alicia Crosby, speaker. "Signs of Hope: Building a Movement." Duke University Chapel. 19 November 2020. <https://chapel.duke.edu/events/online-signs-hope-building-movement-1605823200-1605828600>

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We are not called to save or sort the world. We are called to pay attention to it, to notice those who are vulnerable, hungry, shivering, shaking, imprisoned, and isolated. We are called to tend to them, listen to them, value them, treat them with the worth of rulers – not just once, but over and over and over and over again.

The next time we celebrate an exciting invention, let us also ask – who is keeping the room clean where the work could be done? Who is checking the equipment? Who is ensuring that everyone got enough rest in order to do the job well? Who else is helping out?

The next time we hear about a great entrepreneur, let us also ask – who is making their meals? Who is caring for their kids and keeping up with their paperwork? Who is helping them maintain the rest of their lives?

Next time we imagine Christ as King, let us also imagine: who cared for him when he was hungry, stripped of his clothes, cast into prison, or thrown out of town? Who cared for his family when he was crucified, died, and was buried? Who tended to the body of Christ then and who is tending to the body of Christ now?

Today is Christ the King Sunday. But if we look for Jesus on the throne, we will miss him here in our world. And even if we look for Jesus here in the world, we still might not recognize him.

So, let us pay attention, especially in this tough time of pandemic. Let us pay attention to those who are already at work, responding to the needs of those in our midst, those who are already feeding our hungry, clothing our homeless, welcoming our strangers, visiting our prisoners, protecting our vulnerable, tending to our children.

Let us value this work as if Jesus Christ himself were doing it.

For indeed, he already is.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

***Reverend Kathryn Lester-Bacon preached this sermon during Sunday morning worship at Duke University Chapel on 22 November 2020. This is a rough manuscript.***