

July 2, Ordinary 13A (Matthew 10:40–42)

Matthew 25 is not the only way that Christ appears in our world.

by [Liddy Barlow](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

For decades, students in clinical pastoral education have heard the same words before their first day out on the wards. It is part pep talk, part caution. When you enter a hospital room as a chaplain, you are no longer yourself alone. You are representing Christ. Alongside you, behind you, following you into the room, invisibly but truly, is the entire church. You bring God with you. You are yourself, but you stand for more than yourself.

Sending his disciples out on mission, Jesus gives them his own version of that same speech. As his representatives, they now carry an identity beyond their own. When they travel, preach, teach, and heal, it is Christ whose work will be done by their hands. The world will meet Jesus through them: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

When we think about encountering Christ in human form, most often we think of Matthew 25:31–46, in which the Son of Man appears as “the least of these.” For those of us who read from a place of comfort, Matthew 25 calls us to see Christ in the other: in those who are hungry and thirsty, lonely and imprisoned, in those who wait in hospital beds for student chaplains. Our task as disciples should be active service, inspired by seeing Jesus in the faces of others in need. We serve him by serving our neighbors.

But Matthew 25 is not the only way that Christ appears in our world. In Matthew 10, Jesus appears not as a person in need but as a disciple empowered to go forth: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” Jesus speaks in the second person: he speaks to you, to each of us. Christ is not only visible in the other, in people outside ourselves. We can also see him in us. When we look in the mirror, we will see his face looking back.

It is our privilege and our responsibility to make Christ visible.

But we cannot reflect his face if we stay at home, among those whom we know. Christ is made visible in the act of welcoming, in giving and receiving hospitality. If we never encounter strangers, Jesus has no opportunity to be made manifest in welcome.

I serve as the director of a regional ecumenical agency, where my role includes a ministry of representation. When I show up at annual conventions, ordinations, or Holy Week services, I come as a manifestation of the church universal, the web of relationships in which each congregation is held. At the election of a bishop, I represent not only my own curiosity but also the prayers of the wider church. At an annual meeting, I'm not only a stranger in the pew but a symbol of the mission partnerships that extend beyond a judicatory's bounds.

I try to worship in a congregation of each of our member judicatories at least once a year, in part to increase my knowledge of the traditions that my agency serves. Before accepting this call, I had never been to a Salvation Army worship service or a Byzantine Catholic liturgy; I'd never spent Sunday morning at an African-American Baptist church. I'd never attended a Chrism mass or the enthronement of a Serbian Orthodox bishop. I don't have a good excuse as to why. I suppose I was unsure of the expected etiquette, worried about standing when everyone else was sitting, wary of unfamiliar songs and prayers that everyone else would know by heart. I suppose I was afraid that I would not be welcome.

The opposite is true. This year, on the Wednesday of Holy Week, I went to a small Antiochian Orthodox church for a service of holy unction. I slipped into a pew, a woman in a clerical collar, clearly a stranger. The congregation stood as the small choir chanted, as the visiting bishop proclaimed the gospel, as the priest's preschool-age daughter darted impishly around the sanctuary. We read seven different sets of scripture lessons related to healing and anointing, lighting a candle in a seven-branched candelabrum after each one.

At last the time of the anointing came. The priest explained the rite. Only Orthodox Christians may receive the oil, he said; it is a sacrament, and receiving sacraments implies theological assent. But, he added, his eyes finding mine, if there are any non-Orthodox visitors in the room who would like to come forward, we do have some myrrh and would be glad to anoint you with that.

Gratefully, I joined the line of the faithful, presenting the priest with my open palms. He swapped one oil for the other. “Thank you for coming,” he said, as he used a cotton swab to paint tiny crosses on my hands, my wrists, my forehead. The scent lingered as I returned to my pew.

I grieve the divisions in Christ’s church. Our petty squabbles and genuine grievances have distracted us from our mission, squandered our resources, broken hearts, and ruined lives. It’s a tragedy that we cannot come to one communion table, a shame that our belief in “one holy catholic and apostolic church” remains just an abstract ideal. Our divisions have made us strangers.

But even within this brokenness, there is a deep blessing. Because we are strangers, we can welcome each other. Because we are not yet at home with one another, we can extend hospitality. And in that welcome, Christ can be present in our midst, in the faces of our fellow Christians, as we bear his image to one another. We can bring God with us as we cross the threshold of an unfamiliar church, and we can find God reflected back to us in the welcome we receive there. We can dare to experience the unknown—trusting that alongside us, invisibly but truly, comes Jesus the Christ.