This morning Jesus has a message for us and it is a message that our country really needs to hear right now. The quick version of what he says is, “Don’t be a jerk.” He says it more eloquently of course saying, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” This is an idea that runs through a lot of Jesus ministry, the idea that when you do something to another person you are doing it to him. So the question is how often have we flipped off Jesus while in traffic, or yelled at Jesus when on the phone with customer support?

Much has been written about the decline of Christianity in the west, and I don’t want to get into theories about why, all I want to do is point out that the decline in Christianity has not led to a decline in religious fervor, it is just that this fervor has been channeled in nasty and selfish ways. Why does Jesus remind us that we need to treat everyone as if we were addressing him, it is, at least partially, because our instincts are tribal. In other words we might treat those in our own tribe well, but anyone outside of it we are want to disdain. The idea of a brotherhood of mankind is very different than the tribal religions that have been so prevalent in much of history. In those religions your tribe had its god and your god hated the other tribe’s people and their god wanting you to wipe them out. And our society’s move away form Christianity has been a step backwards into the exclusive and nasty gods of times past. These are gods who do not love everyone and do not yearn for goodwill and peace among nations. Sure we don’t identify our religions with Odin or Ba’al they are not that interesting. Our new gods are political views and our salvation is found in tax rates, health care distribution, and energy production. And while these new gods may be incredibly boring and uninteresting they still have the same demands of the old pagan gods, which is the destruction of those outside of the tribe. We have prophets but they do not eat locusts and wild honey but rather host nightly TV shows where they warn of the judgment to come if we do not repent and vote for their chosen candidate. In these prophets telling the person on the other side cannot be a child of God, because this new religion does not allow for that. There can be no forgiveness and no grace, there can only be total destruction of those with whom we disagree.

And so we have Jesus today saying that God is not exclusive, that we cannot discern who is in and who is out so we must instead treat everyone in the way we would treat Jesus. It has been a long time since I have been this depressed about the state of our country and I think it is largely because we have forgotten these words from Jesus. We refuse to believe that someone of the opposite political view from us was also created in the image of God. And when we feel like this the only answer is the total destruction of the other person. But that is not the call of the Christian. The God of Christianity does not let us get away with our petty squabbles and home cooked religions. No instead he says, “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” Remember the sin that started everything in the garden was the desire to know good and evil. Now we think we know it and toss judgment around. But we don’t know who is good and who is evil so all we do is mess things up. May we remember that when we do things we are doing them to Christ and may we do so in such a way that brings glory to God and not to the destruction to our souls.