When I was a senior in high school, I remember being in downtown Columbus at the beginning of November. I cannot remember why I was there, but I do remember an incident that is etched in my mind.

As I was waiting for the city bus, a bum approached me and asked me for a handout. It was 1960, the year that John Kennedy and Richard Nixon squared off for the presidency and I was wearing a political button proclaiming my allegiance for one of them. The beggar’s first words to me were: “I’m for him too!” Of course I figured that, whatever this man’s politics (if any), he would have said this line to me regardless of whose button I was wearing.

Any way, I listened to this guy’s story and I ended up giving him a handout. I learned later that it is not usually a good idea to give money directly to someone in need; it is better to try to give them what they need. But my intention was to help this man – and I hope I did. Perhaps more importantly, this little encounter had an impact on me that has lasted my whole life. First of all, it reminded me how blessed I was. I would not have wanted to trade places with the beggar. I realized how good I had it. My family had provided me with much more than I needed and I began to appreciate them a little more.

The other thing this man taught me was the challenge and the beauty of compassion. Of course, I was a Catholic boy in a Catholic high school and I had learned (as Catholic kids still do in Religious education) that to be a follower of Christ means to recognize him in the poor. I had also had practical opportunities to help the needy in many ways, especially by working with the St. Vincent de Paul Society in my home parish. But my meeting with the beggar allowed me to live out my discipleship in a personal way that I hadn’t done before. Although my encounter with him was unsettling, I knew that I had tried to do the right thing. I grew in compassion on that day.

Our Gospel today, of unparalleled power, is of the Last Judgment. St. Matthew depicts Christ the King as the Judge of Heaven and Earth. And what is the criterion on which everyone will be judged? It is on how we have cared for the needy in practical, everyday ways. Here in this Gospel, we have six of the seven corporal works of mercy – the one not there is to bury the dead, which the church added later. This passage is only in Matthew and it is the only one in the gospels that makes clear what will be the basis for Christ’s judgment – he will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need.

It is true that this passage has been over-interpreted to say that neither faith in Christ nor membership in the church is necessary for salvation. Of course, this is not accurate. It is well to remember that this Gospel is addressed to Christian disciples – both the disciples of Jesus when he walked the earth and to the members of the early church in the days that Matthew wrote his gospel. So faith in Christ and in the church is totally presumed here. And our faith must be a given in our time too. We care for the needy in the context of our trusting faith in the Lord. This Gospel is a bold declaration that faithful discipleship is identical with care for the lowly. As the
New Jerome Biblical Commentary puts it, “this [way of thinking] is not a denial of faith; it is of the essence of faith” (p. 669).

St. John of the Cross, the great Carmelite priest of the sixteenth century, once wrote: “In the evening of life, we will be judged on love.” Certainly this is what St. Matthew is telling us. If Christ is truly the King of our hearts, we will care for him in our neighbor on a daily basis. Christ the King’s judgment will not depend on our knowledge or our fame or our wealth. It will depend on the help that we have given. His judgment will be based on the simple things we did (or failed to do) – simple things that anyone can do: giving a hungry person a meal or a thirsty person a drink, visiting and comforting the sick or imprisoned, assisting the unemployed or those who face foreclosure. As Pope Francis is telling us, Christ asks us to be like him who took the unbelievable risk of emptying himself of his divinity to become a human being for us. And so we too have to risk going out of our comfort zone in our time to interact with the poor, to identify with the oppressed, to welcome the immigrant, and to have compassion for the poor.

The Catholic social teaching is not simply a matter of being charitable to the needy (although that is essential for the real disciple) but rather of working to change the unjust structures that have made our modern economic system one in which the gap between rich and poor is now an unacceptable chasm which is slowly wiping out the middle class. Jesus will not ask us if we gave away large sums of money – although those of us who are able may be obliged to do so. He will not ask us if we had plaques inscribed with our names or if we were enrolled in charitable clubs. No, he will ask if we helped simple people in simple ways every day and, I believe, if we advocated in the political arena for these folks as much as possible.

Furthermore, the Judgment will be based on our being uncalculating. The just in today’s Gospel discourse helped people because it was the natural thing to do. Our Christian charity, if it is genuine, is something we do because we cannot help it. It has become second nature. The just in this gospel are surprised to find out that they did something for Christ – they were simply trying to help another human being. Conversely the unjust say, in effect, if only we knew it was you, Jesus, we would gladly have helped; but we thought it was just some bum who was not worth helping. The just, by God’s grace, are uncalculating in their charity and justice. Our motives in helping cannot be to get praise or publicity. The goodness which wins God’s approval is that which is given solely for the sake of helping a neighbor – who always happens to be Christ!

So in this gospel, Jesus confronts us with the wonderful truth that all assistance is given to himself – whether we are conscious of it or not! And all help that is withheld is withheld from Christ. The saints knew this – and that is why they are saints. There is a great legend about St. Martin, the bishop of Tours in France in the fourth century whose Feast Day we just celebrated on November 11. Before he was a bishop, he was a Roman soldier and a simple Christian. His biographer writes of Martin:

One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped Martin and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier’s coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night Martin had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak.
One of the angels said to him, “Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?” And Jesus answered softly, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

This beautiful legend is immortalized in a painting by the famous sixteenth century Spanish artist, El Greco, entitled “St. Martin and the Beggar.” (By the way, El Greco lived at the same time as St. John of the Cross.) I had the privilege of seeing the original of this painting when it came on loan a few years ago from Spain to the museum in Toledo, Ohio. The painting and this Gospel reminds me that we are all called to be saints. And to be a saint is a hard but simple thing: in loving our neighbor and advocating for him or her, we show our love for Christ!