

### Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. [32] All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, [33] and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. [34] Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; [35] for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' [37] Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? [38] And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? [39] And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' [40] And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' [41] Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; [42] for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, [43] I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' [44] Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' [45] Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' [46] And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

### THE SIGN GAME

An Episcopal minister wrote about a game she plays in order to illustrate the point of today's lesson. She prepares a room for a party with finger foods

and punch to drink. Then she pins a sign on each participants' back that indicates a certain status.

For example, one person might have the title "king" or "queen". Another participant might have the title "beggar" or "thief".

The object of the game is to guess what sign is on your back by how others treat you and to help others discover what sign is on their back by treating them as their sign demanded. For example, kings would be treated with deference and respect. Beggars would be treated in a way that was not so nice.

After the game is over the minister asks how they felt when they were treated "according to the sign on their back" and how it felt to treat others in a certain way "according to their sign". I've done simulation exercises like this before, and it's amazing what strong negative emotions can be aroused by nothing more than a game.

Anyway, after the exercise, the minister poses another question. She asks, "What would it be like to live in a community where those on the bottom rung of society were treated as if he or she had a king or queen sign on their backs?"

She then goes on to point out that this is exactly what the Bible teaches. The presence of Christ "hides" in those little ones with a need.

Look around at the brothers and sisters who worship with you today.  
(Go ahead. Look around. I'll wait!)

I know a lot about the people you're looking at this morning. I know that many of them need a hug. I know that many of them are in deep sorrow. I know that many of them are anxious and afraid. I know that many of them are having a hard time making ends meet. I know that some of them have trouble with anger. Some of them are depressed.

And you know what else I know? I know that there is a sign on everyone's back.

The sign reads, "The presence of the risen Christ lives in me. I am a child of the King."

Would that make you look at them any differently today if you could see that sign? Would that change how you greet them?

## FAITH IS PERSONAL

The problem with the church today is a problem of relationship. We don't have relationships with each other because we don't take the time and effort to get to know each other. We think that faith is yet another commodity that can be bought and sold. Religion has become an entertainment to be received in the rarified air of an auditorium.

Not so according to Jesus. According to Jesus faith is always personal. Faith always comes through a presence. Faith is always about the person next to you. Faith always comes through caring for a need in the name of Christ.

Jim Wallis, the editor of the Christian magazine, *Sojourners* talks about how most people see the poor in our society. He wrote that most people see the poor in two ways, on television or in statistics.

He said that seeing the poor in this way might make us concerned that the problem is so large, but it will never make us compassionate. Compassion only comes through a relationship. Compassion only comes when we take the risky step of getting to know the person in need.

But we often want to look the other way when it comes to the poor. We want to cut the poor out of our lives. We want to act as if they don't exist.

## THE HOLY BIBLE

Wallis went on to tell a story about a member of his group, a young overly enthusiastic seminary student, who decided to cut every reference to the poor out of a Bible as a way to demonstrate how many references there are to the poor in the Bible. It took him a very long time!

And Wallis said that when he got through with that project, the word "Holy" Bible had a whole new meaning for him!

Not only was this Bible full of holes, it was in shreds. Wallis used to take this Bible with him when he preached, hold it in the air and say, "Brothers and sister, this is the Bible for many of us, full of holes from all we have cut out."

Insofar as we leave the poor and those in need out of our Bibles and out of our lives we have a faith that will fall apart. We will never know Jesus.

Wallis would conclude his sermon with a story about a woman who had a Bible and a life that was not full of holes. She ran the Sojourners community center, just one and a half miles from the White House. Three hundred families would be standing in line to receive a bag of groceries just to get them through the week.

But, before the doors were opened, Mary Glover, a sixty year old black woman would lead the volunteers in prayer. She prayed,

"We thank you for another day to serve you, Lord. Lord, we know that you'll be coming through this line today so, Lord, help us to treat you well."

Wallis wrote,

"Mary Glover's prayer is the best commentary on the 25th Chapter of Matthew I have ever heard.

She knows very well who it is that stands in line with the hungry or sleeps on those steam grates with the homeless in Washington, D.C.”

## SEEING HIS BROTHER

I heard a story about a man who worked in a homeless shelter in Charlotte, NC. His work with the shelter was so effective that this shy man received an award. Someone asked him why he was so committed to this work.

And the man talked about a brother who lived out West. He had a severe mental illness and often resorted to staying in various homeless shelters when his paranoid delusions took over his life.

This volunteer said that when he served the homeless people in his area, he imagines that one of them is his brother.

That’s the idea behind this passage. The ones we serve are our brother and sister. They may even be the incarnation of our Lord Himself.

## JUDGMENT

But, we need to note that this passage has a harsh side as well. There are some who are judged because of how they treat the least among them.

Frederick Douglas was a slave who wrote about his mistress, Mrs. Sophia Auld. According to Douglas, Sophia was a kind, gentle woman when he first came to her. He wrote,

"When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach."

She treated Douglas well, more like a young son than a slave. But, over time that changed. You see, when you put the sign “slave” on someone’s back, society has a way of requiring you to treat them accordingly.

And so, in deference to a domineering husband, Sophia began to withdraw her affection for Frederick. But, more than that, her personality began to change as well.

Her hardened attitude toward Frederick began to show up in her treatment of others. No longer was the compassionate person who was quick to answer the needs of others. Now she was quite the opposite of what she used to be.

Douglas wrote, “The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work.... Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.”

The Bible teaches that there will be a judgment of those who do not live a compassionate life. In today’s lesson, we have picture of Christ the king, who comes to judge the nations. He separates the sheep from the goats; he separates those who just “talk the talk” from those who actually “walk the walk”.

And everyone, sheep and goats alike, are surprised at the outcome.

I do believe there will be a final judgment of this world. Indeed, in my view, a loving God must judge those things in our lives and in our world that are not just. God told his people long ago that he would not abide evil forever. One day there would be a judgment day.

But, beyond that coming judgment day, aren't we all susceptible to the kind of judgment that came into the life of Sophia Auld? No matter how much we want to serve the Lord, if we succumb to the temptation to label others, if we succumb to the temptation to say that someone is beyond compassion and salvation, then we too are changed in a horrible way. We can go down a slippery slope and lose our way.

We too can lose our very soul because we are unwilling to search for the hidden presence of Christ in the lives of the least and the lost.

### A MINISTRY IN HAITI

A minister told of a visit to Haiti this summer. Haiti, as many of you may know, is one of the poorest nations in the world. The average lifespan is just over forty years. The land is horribly depleted. Unemployment runs somewhere over 80 percent.

The minister and his friends visited many places with desperate needs, but one place impressed them more than others. It was a home on a side street in Port-au-Prince. A little woman in her sixties met them at the door. Ruth was her name, and she had come to Haiti from her native Wisconsin several years ago to work as a nurse among the poor.

Eventually Ruth began collecting children off the street, children who had been abandoned because they were severely physically or mentally handicapped. Ruth and her fellow workers now had about 30 of these children in a home in the city. Most of them will live with her until they die; for there is no way that they can live on their own.

Ruth finances her operation with funds from wherever she can get them ... mostly from churches in the United States. Some of the children have even traveled to the States for needed surgery.

Ruth smiles and takes time to hug each child as she passes by. Many of the children are not even able to make it out of bed. After their visit one member of this mission team said, “I think I’ve been in the presence of a living saint.”

The minister was not so sure that Ruth would see it this way. She told him, “I just saw a need and tried to do what I could.”

One member of the group asked Ruth, “Do you ever get discouraged? Do you ever wonder if your work is effective?”

Ruth replied, “I try not to ask myself about effectiveness. I try to discipline myself to just do what I can do today, one child at a time, and let the Lord worry about tomorrow.”

## THE INEFFECTIVE GOD

I think that Ruth’s reply was a wise one. Sometimes we’re too enamored with statistics and effectiveness. Perhaps God chooses to come into our world in a very “ineffective” way. The God we serve is quite surprising in that way you know.

The Bible tells us that once God sent his Son into the world to show the world His love. This Savior, this King was born to a little girl named Mary in a manger, a cattle stall of all places.

Can you imagine how ridiculous that must have seemed to them, God coming in human form to people who had taxes to pay and had to struggle to make ends meet like everyone else? No wonder they didn’t recognize he who was born king of the Jews.

Some laughed. Some said it was heresy. Those in power finally killed Him. But, even death could not defeat God’s Son. It only intensified the hope.



The resurrection story shook an empire and changed the ancient world. And it's still happening. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is still among us in ways that we cannot imagine.

## WARMTH VERSUS LIGHT

How do we find the presence of Christ in the world today? We find his presence in the warmth of compassion.

It is said that when the German poet, Goethe died he cried, "Light, light, let there be more light."

The twentieth century Spanish philosopher, Miguel Unamuno, reflecting on these words wrote, "It is not more light we need, but more warmth. Warmth, warmth, more warmth! We die of cold, not of darkness. It is not the night that kills but the frost."

I think Jesus wants us to come in out of the cold. This story was originally written as a judgment of some religious leaders who knew a lot about theology but not a lot about love. They had light but were lacking in the warmth department.

Might we be a lot like those religious leaders of old?

Sometimes we are. Sometimes the church can be a very frosty place that kills. Need I remind you that some refer to us Presbyterians as "God's frozen chosen?" This passage suggests that maybe the frozen can't be chosen!

Jesus himself said that not all those who use his name today will be recognized by him when the final day comes. We must be warned by this passage. There are no unimportant people or encounters in our life. It all matters.

We sometimes say that the “devil is in the details.” This passage tells us just the opposite. God is in the details. Each and every day, each and every encounter holds the seeds of salvation and promise.

The presence of Jesus is with us now and forever.  
May we live by that promise.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**