

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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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."

WHERE IS JESUS?

Pastor Roger Lovette tells of how his young daughter used to crawl up into his lap, put both hands on his face and say, "Look at me." When she had his undivided attention she would ask the same question over and over again, "Daddy, where is Jesus? Where is Jesus?"

Lovette said that there was something unnerving about those big blue eyes staring up at him and asking that penetrating question. And he said that this is a question that still disturbs him. "Where is Jesus?"

I know what he means. That's a question that people have asked me in one way or another down through the years. When tragedy or calamity comes into a life, they ask the question, "Where is Jesus?" When a person struggles to have faith, they ask the question, "Where is Jesus?"

I remember that after the terrorist attacks of September 11 for the first time in a long time the news media were actually interviewing ministers and asking the question, "Where is God in all this? What does this mean?" In their own way they too were asking the question

that Roger's daughter was asking, "Where is Jesus?"

The ministers answered those questions as best they could, but I sensed that even the best of them were overwhelmed by the enormity of the moment. They too were asking the same question, "Where is God? Where is Jesus in this hour of need?"

SKEPTICISM AND A NEW OPENNESS

More recently the question has not been asked with wide-eyed innocence. Many books have been written that seek to answer the "where is Jesus" question by portraying Jesus as just a man who was deified by the church that came after him.

The continued popularity of the DaVinci Code even after all of its arguments have been debunked by scholars shows a pervasive skepticism about Jesus in the modern world. Almost every night on one of the cable channels there is yet another program that purports to present the shocking truth about the "real" Jesus.

In a way I can understand the skepticism. After all it has been a long, long time since Jesus was here in the flesh. The church used to say come quickly, Lord Jesus.

But, now we don't think that much about Jesus coming in power and glory. We assume that tomorrow will be just like today. We are lulled to sleep by the sameness of life.

But, I would suggest that this sameness is an illusion. In the paper this past week I was reading about a new intelligence report that stated our place in the world won't be the same in the near future. Other nations will gain power, and we will be just one of many players in a global economy.

We have seen recently that a new economic model is emerging. A world economy based upon ever increasing consumption just cannot be sustained.

In a rapidly changing and uncertain world I predict people will once again be asking the age old question with a sense of urgency and openness. They will ask, "Where is Jesus?" Where can I find a sense of comfort and solace in a world that is constantly changing?

As a pastor I have noticed an increased willingness on the part of people who are not necessarily "religious" to listen to the gospel message. These are the people some call seekers. In their own way they are asking the same question, "Where is Jesus? Where is the Spirit of God in this confusing and unpredictable world?"

A MESSAGE FOR AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

We need to be prepared to answer that question. But, what is the answer? How do we find Jesus? How does the life of a man who lived over 2,000 years ago affect us today? Today's lesson points the way.

Our Scripture for today was also written in a time of uncertainty and dislocation. When Matthew wrote his gospel (somewhere around 70 AD) the Roman government was cracking down on the political dissidents in Israel. The temple would be totally destroyed, and the

Jewish people would be scattered all over the ancient world.

If you think that our economy is bad, can you imagine a world where all your friends are refugees? Can you imagine a world where the most powerful nation on earth is absolutely against what you believe?

This was Matthew's world. And I'm sure that in this uncertain world people wanted to some reassurance. They wanted to know why Jesus didn't come again and judge the world once and for all. They too asked, "Where is Jesus?"

Down through the years the church has answered that question in many ways. And one way that the question was answered is in the writing of the gospel of Matthew. Where is Jesus? He is to be found in the story of salvation told by Matthew.

Matthew took great pains to point out that Jesus was the Messiah and more than the Messiah. From the story of his birth to his sermon on the mount to the details of his crucifixion and resurrection the message is the same. In the man Jesus, we see the human face of God. The glory of God is revealed in the man Jesus.

If you want to see Jesus, you need to hear his words and put them into practice. According to Jesus this is the foundation for a strong house of faith. This is the rock upon which our life needs to be built. (Matthew 7:24) It is not enough to just read about the faith or memorize doctrines or participate in the rituals of the church. We must learn to put the words of faith into practice. We must learn to do what faith requires.

And in our lesson for today we learn that when we do what faith requires, we touch the human hand of God.

Where is Jesus? Some would say that he is found in the words of the Bible. Some would say that he is found in sacrament of the Lord's Supper and in the mystic sweet communion of the church. All those are good answers, but they are not the best answer.

The best answer is found in our lesson for today. In Matthew's gospel this is the last parable that Jesus gives his disciples before his passion, crucifixion and resurrection. As Jesus and his disciples look down upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives

Jesus knows that soon he will be abandoned by his friends and murdered by his enemies. Jesus knows that this is his last opportunity to encourage disciples who will experience tremendous fear, guilt and uncertainty. What can he say to reassure them?

How can he summarize the essence of faith not only these disciples but for generations of disciples to come who will face their own times of uncertainty and change? How can he help honest seekers who only want to know the answer to the age old question, "Where is Jesus?"

A PARABLE ABOUT THE FUTURE

Jesus tells them a parable. In the future you will not be able to see clearly. Some days it will

seem like I am absent. On those days you will be surrounded by people in need.

Some will be hungry and thirsty. Some will be homeless. Some will be overwhelmed by mental illness. Some will need clothes. Some will be in trouble with the law.

Jesus said, "You will be overwhelmed by the need, and it will cause you to question your faith." But, don't despair, and don't turn the person in need away. Do you know why? I am present in that person who is hungry and thirsty. I am present in that person who is in financial distress. I am present in that person who has made bad choices. I am present in that person who is sick."

To put it another way, if you want to find Jesus today, you will have to find him in the human face of need.

You'll note that in the parable both those who helped the least and the lost, and those who refused to help the least and the lost had one thing in common.

They didn't see the presence of Jesus in these little ones. They were unaware of the importance of the moment.

LEARNING TO SEE JESUS

I think that we often interpret this parable too simplistically. We emphasize the judgment too much and emphasize the presence of Christ too little.

We say that it is our responsibility to care for the least and if we don't do it enough then we will be one of the goats who will be on God's bad side when the final curtain of eternity goes down.

But, the real question raised by this passage is this: how do we motivate people to not only help the needy ones but also see the face of Jesus in those needy ones?

Some people may be willing to reluctantly help those in trouble out of a sense of duty and even guilt. They don't want to be a goat that goes to judgment when that final bell tolls.

But, I have found this is not a very helpful or even effective way to think about this passage.

The benefactors often resent those who do not have the "gumption" to get their life together. And though some good is done, the greater good is missed. We do not find the presence of Christ.

I would suggest that those of us who help the person in need and those of us who refuse the person in need both need something more.

We need to see Jesus.

We need to see Jesus in the one who is hungry or homeless or afraid or confused.

Don't just limit the application of this passage to the work done at Daily Meal or the cold

night shelter. Think about all the people that you meet every day who are struggling.

Think about the friend who has lost a job or is anxious about some personal problem.

Think about the family member or loved one who is going through a difficult time of transition.

There is someone in your life that has a need. Maybe you are helping them right now. Maybe you are glad to help or maybe you resent it.

But, this passage suggests that we do more than just help. This passage suggests that whether we are the ones doing the helping or we are the ones being helped that Jesus is in that relationship.

Jesus is in that act of compassion ... if only we had the eyes to see.

A specialist in Celtic spirituality and monastic hospitality asks two simple but revealing questions of anyone who would aspire to be truly Christian:

"Do people see Christ in us?

Did we see Christ in them?"

IN CHRIST

Last Wednesday the choir participated in the worship service at Good Samaritan Village celebrating Founder's Week. The preacher that night rightly pointed out that one of the most common phrases in the writings of Paul and thus in the New Testament was the phrase, "in Christ." And then he went on to say that the meaning of this common phrase was explained quite nicely by the motto of the Good Samaritan Society. "In Christ's love everybody is somebody."

There's a lot of truth in that. If the essence of Christianity is found in God's love for the world in Christ Jesus, then we find Christ in the world. We find Christ in ourselves, and we find Christ in our brother or sister.

In fact if Christ is our example we look for his presence not only in those who love us, but also in those who are even our enemies. In God's eyes everybody is somebody. The whole world is important to God, not just a portion of the world, and if we want to see Jesus, we will have to adjust our way of thinking about the world.

We've just been through our stewardship campaign with our pledges and our offering plates and our budgets.

But, I wonder if true stewardship really begins by opening our eyes to the needs and possibilities of the world around us. True stewardship begins when we look at the world through the eyes of Jesus. If we do this the world becomes a different place, and we become a different people.

KEN'S STORY

Ann Lamott found her world transformed in a little Presbyterian Church in California. She came to the faith late in life and has truly been turned upside down and inside out by the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. In a book that she dedicated to this little church she told a story about the power of this personal God of grace that has come into her life.

One of the newest members of their congregation was a man named Ken, and Ken was dying of AIDS. Shortly after coming to the congregation Ken's partner died of the disease. But, Ken kept coming week after week. The people could see that like his late partner Ken was slowly dying.

Anne writes that there was a large and jovial black woman in the choir named Ranola who was as devout as you could be. She kept looking at Ken out of the corners of her eyes and was more than a little standoffish toward him. She had been raised in the south by Christians who taught her that Ken's way of life was an abomination.

And so it was hard for her to see Ken as he was. Anne said that Ranola and several other members were afraid that they might catch what Ken had. So they stood at a distance.

But, Ken kept coming and won over most of the members of the church. During prayer time he would share that even in his decline he had felt the grace and redemption of God.

On one particular morning the congregation began singing "His Eye is on the Sparrow." The whole church stood except for Ken who was too weak to stand. And the church began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?"

And Ranola from the choir kept watching Ken and then suddenly her face began to contort and tears came to her eyes, and she left the choir and moved toward Ken. She bent down, picked him up and lifted him like a white rag doll.

Anne said that Ranola held him next to her as if he were her child as they all sang together, "His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me."

So you tell me, "Where is Jesus in this story?" I think you know.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Let me close this morning with a Paul Harvey rest of the story moment.

Remember Roger Lovette's daughter who used to crawl up on his lap and ask him "Where is Jesus?" Well, Roger said that she quit asking that question. She grew up and now she teaches third graders.

She comes home and tells Roger about her children.

She talks about La Tron whose only safe place in all his life is that little classroom. She talks about the Indian student who barely understands English and sits as close to her desk as he can get each day with frightened eyes. She talks about the bully who wants her attention

all day long.

Roger concludes by saying, "If I ever asked my teacher-daughter where I might find Jesus today. I think I know what she would say. I think I know."

Let me make the question more personal.

Where is Jesus in your life?

I think you know.

Amen.

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