

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 25:31-46

“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.”

A DIFFICULT PASSAGE

In the wrong hands Matthew’s gospel can be hard to swallow. Moralistic and legalistic preachers can be very judgmental and condemning of others in their preaching of a passage like our lesson for today. The summary of their message

will be something like, “Either you care for the least among you or you’re going to hell.”

And the really tough thing about a sermon like that is that it seems to be backed up by Scripture. The goats are sent to eternal punishment. The sheep are sent to eternal life.

And at first blush, this passage makes it sound like salvation comes through human effort. If we don’t treat the least among us with compassion we receive God’s condemnation.

But, I thought salvation was by grace through faith. What’s going on here?

CONTEXT

Several things need to be said about this passage. First, we need to put this passage in its literary context.

Last week we talked about the fact that Jesus was in conflict with the religious and political leaders of his day. He told his disciples that he would undergo persecution and eventually be crucified by those he came to save.

In response to this in a private setting on the Mount of Olives the disciples wanted to know what was going to happen next. What should they be doing and what should they look for in order to anticipate the coming of God’s kingdom?

In response to this question Jesus told them a number of parables about the second coming.

Last week in the parable of the talents we learned that the disciples shouldn’t be afraid to invest what God had given them to grow God’s kingdom. They were to be a people marked by joy instead of fear. They didn’t need to play it safe because they trusted in the goodness of their Master.

THE LEAST

And in this week’s parable we learn where the disciples will find the presence of Jesus in this uncomfortable interval between his first and second coming.

In John’s gospel Jesus tells his disciples that he will soon be going away. And furthermore he tells them that where he is going they will not be able to follow. The disciples are distraught.

But, Jesus told them not to be afraid and troubled, and he gave them a promise. He promised the disciples that he would not leave them as orphans. The Spirit would come to bring them strength and comfort for the road ahead.

But, where do we find the Spirit of the risen Christ?

HEAVENLY PARABLE, EARTHLY MEANING

In today's parable we discover the answer. The Spirit of the risen Christ resides in those that serve in Jesus' name. When we lift up those who are knocked down in life, it is more than just the right thing to do. It is a way of connecting with the eternal. It is as if we have served Jesus through serving the least among us.

This passage is not so much about condemning those who do not serve the least. This passage is about discovering the surprising presence of Jesus. This is a parable about the end, but the message of this parable is really a word of hope concerning the present.

I like the idea that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. In this case it's reversed. This is a heaven story with an earthly meaning. This is a parable about heaven come to earth.

SHEEP AND GOATS SURPRISED

Those who are identified as sheep and those who are identified as goats have something in common. They are both surprised by what Jesus says. The sheep say, "Lord, when was it that you were hungry and I gave you food?" And the goats say, "Lord, when was it that you were hungry and I didn't give you food?"

Both groups are surprised by their failure to recognize the Son of Man. And I would say that both groups are surprised by where the Son of Man hangs out.

In Jesus' ministry we learn that Jesus hung out in some questionable places with some questionable people. Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus forgave sins. Jesus healed the blind and suggested that the religious and political leaders were blind.

Didn't Jesus know that in order to be successful that you have to hang out with the movers and shakers? But, apparently Jesus didn't play that game.

So why would we expect the Spirit of the risen Christ to be any different today? We've been looking for the Lord in all the wrong places. And we continue to do it.

Even today no one expects to see Jesus in the face of the disadvantaged, the poor, the imprisoned, and all those who are in need. That's because we still think of God in terms of power and might and glory.

And in fact today's parable begins that way. Today's parable begins by describing the coming of the Son of Man in glory. This Jesus who comes is king who sits on a throne and is surrounded by his angels.

But, what does this king of glory do? How does he judge? He judges by identifying with the least of these. This glorious king challenges our tendency to always look for God in the places of power.

THE HUMILITY OF CHRIST

Think about it.

Where was the King of kings the born? He was born in a stable in little Bethlehem.

Where was the throne from which this Savior reigned? It was the throne of a cross and the powerful salvation came not through success but through unthinkable sacrifice.

As Paul put it, it was through humbling himself on the cross that Jesus achieved the ultimate glory. It was because Jesus gave everything that God lifted him up and gave him the name that is above all names. (See Philippians 2:8-9)

We all know the story, but we still look for the Lord in all the wrong places.

The history of the church is filled with stories of how the powerful tried to appropriate the name of Jesus to accomplish their own agenda. We continue to look for Jesus in the palace and the places of power, even though we know that he is to be found in the stable and on the cross.

This parable reminds the disciples, and it reminds us that the presence of God comes to us in some very surprising places.

If we want to find Jesus we will find him not through the way of upward mobility but through the way of downward mobility.

GOD MEETS US IN OUR NEED

In this parable Jesus promises to be present with those who are in great need. That means if we want to experience God's presence we look for God in the need of those around us and in our own need as well.

Some of our statements of faith talk about God in regal terms. God is all knowing, all powerful, all just and so forth. I understand that. God is the creator of the universe, the author of all that is. This is an appropriate way to talk about God.

But, that's not where this all mighty God meets us.

God meets us in the humble presence of a man named Jesus. And God continues to meet us in humble circumstances. The presence of God among the least continues to take us by surprise. No matter how many times we hear the story, we still do not have eyes to see and ears to hear.

God still upsets our plans and disrupts our expectations. The kingdom comes, but the king of glory is hidden among the least and the lost.

DELIGHTS IN SURPRISE

One thing I do know. The God we serve delights in surprises. God's Son wasn't born in Athens, the seat of learning or Rome, the seat of power or even Jerusalem, the Holy City.

Surprise, Jesus was born in lowly Bethlehem in the form of a vulnerable infant to parents who didn't have a roof over their head.

And this King Jesus didn't come to conquer the world through political or military might. Surprise, this King ruled through the pain and scandal of the cross.

Today I encourage us to be open to God's surprise.

The God we know in Christ is not to be found in some distant eternal life. He is with us here and now in the concrete and real needs of our neighbors.

He is with us here and now in our needs too.

The God we know in Jesus is not revealed in power. The God we know in Jesus is revealed in vulnerability.

The God we know in Jesus is not revealed in strength. The God we know in Jesus is revealed brokenness.

And the God we know in Jesus is revealed not in judgment but in mercy.

JUDGMENT AND GLORY

I know. That last one seems like a stretch, especially considering how our parable ends. That part about the Son of Man dismissing the unrighteous to eternal fire is not easy to forget.

But, once again we have to be aware of the context. Jesus tells this parable on the way to the cross.

In the *very next verse* after our lesson for today we read, “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’”

I wonder if the Son of Man’s “coming in glory” is not about some final judgment at the end of time but is instead about the coming of God’s salvation through the cross.

And on the cross the Centurion who crucifies Jesus recognizes this glory even as Jesus dies on that cross. He said, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

In the midst of such death and pain, the glory of God was revealed so clearly that even an enemy could recognize it. And maybe in the end the sheep and the goats are not sorted but lie down together with the lion and the lamb.

SHEEP AND GOATS

Almost flippantly I asked my Bible study class why the goats get such a bad rap in the Bible. Why are the sheep and the goats separated?

In researching my sermon I came across a picture in which the sheep and the goats were not separated. Instead, they were nuzzling each other in deep affection with eyes closed.

I found that sheep in goats often grow up together, that in fact they do well together.

I wonder if this is the final surprise.

We sort people according to our prejudices and fears. But, God brings us back together in ways that we could scarcely imagine.

It's odd, but those who talk the most about hell in our world often don't understand why hell is an important concept.

They talk about hell in terms of the final judgment and the need to get your theology right, right now lest you be caught unawares when the final curtain falls.

But, as I read the New Testament it strikes me that Jesus didn't talk so much about right theology as he did about right action. It's what we do that counts. Walking the walk brings life and power to the words of faith.

People often use speculation about the future as a way to shirk their responsibility for today.

But, Jesus turned that on its head. He said that God's future requires that we begin preparing for eternity today.

And we do it by simply caring for each other.

YOU CANNOT CRUCIFY HIS LOVE

I had a friend who said that education alone doesn't make us good. In fact education alone without any kind of moral compass makes us nothing more than "clever devils!"

Sadly I know this to be all too true.

Each week I meet people who know the Bible by heart, but their hearts are far from God. Each week I meet people who are filled with knowledge, but they do not know the power of love and service.

The very bright religious and political leaders of Jesus' day would soon prove themselves to be "clever devils" as they crucify the Lord.

But, they could not crucify his love.

Surprise, the glory of God continues to show up in the midst of pain and death. Surprise, the glory of God continues to show up in places that seem to be without hope.

Surprise, God loves the world so much that God has decided to identify with us fully and completely.

He identified with us so completely that we can sometimes recognize the face of God in the face of our neighbor.

We meet God in the acts of mercy and service that we offer and the acts of mercy and service that are offered to us.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF BROKEN PEOPLE

This is the surprise. This is the Good News. God is with us, here and now.

I like the way our church does small things for those broken by life. We send a shoebox filled with toys. We collect a little food for the pantry. We serve a meal to the down and out.

These things might not seem like much, but they are something. And according to this passage little things have a way of adding up.

But, notice that this passage is not just about giving a small gift in the name of Christ.

It's also about giving ourselves to another person. The word compassion means to feel with someone. And in order to feel with someone you have to know that person. You have to give the gift of your presence.

Notice that verse 35 says this of those broken by life, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." What does it mean to welcome someone?

Does it mean to go up to them and say, "It's good to see you? I'm glad you're here today?" Well, that's a start. But, when the Bible talks about welcome it means more.

That word translated “welcome” means to “draw people together” and to “bring people into your life.” It is a word also used of gathering a harvest or taking in a bountiful catch of fish.

In other words, welcome begins with a vision of a greater community; a greater salvation that is made possible through the warmth of human embrace and simple acts of compassion.

Welcome is more than just a greeting. Welcome is a lifestyle and a faith statement. Whenever the Bible talks about welcoming strangers there is an allusion to the faith of God’s people in the Old Testament.

Because God’s people knew what it was like to be slaves, to be strangers in a foreign land, they were commanded to welcome and care for the stranger in their land.

They believed that God’s deliverance had a claim on their lives. God’s salvation required them to be gracious toward the foreigner in their land.

God is still revealed in this fellowship of broken people that we call the church. God is still revealed in the seemingly small gestures of mercy that we offer.

It may not be where we expect God to be.
But, it is exactly where we need God to be.

Amen.