

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.”

## FAITH SUMMARY

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 and challenge them to be steadfast in the faith?

How can he summarize the essence of faith not only for these disciples but also for generations of disciples to come who will face their own times of uncertainty and change? How can he help honest seekers find faith in a time of uncertainty?

Jesus points his disciples toward the future, God's future. He said that in those last days when all is said and done the nations of the world would be gathered before the throne of God for the great judgment.

And the criteria for the final judgment will be compassion. The ones who show compassion toward those broken by life will enter into the joy of the kingdom.

And those who do not show compassion toward those broken by life will be cast out of the kingdom.

I CAN DO THAT!

I don't know about you, but I've always found this passage to be a bit disturbing. I would like to think that when the final judgment comes Christ would number me with the sheep instead of the goats. But, when I look honestly at my life, I realize that I fall short of what faith requires.

Sometimes I'm a sheep. Sometimes I'm compassionate. But, sometimes I'm a goat. Sometimes I don't take the time to care for the needs of those broken by life.

I have my excuses. So do you. And yet this passage makes us wonder. Have we done enough? Where will we stand when we come before the judgment throne of God?

That's an important question. But, something I read this week caused me to look at this passage in a whole new way.

William Willimon wrote about teaching a Bible study on this lesson to a group of students at Duke University. After the chaplain read the Scripture a sophomore blurted out, "I can do that."

Willimon was taken aback by the reply. He said, "What? What did you say?" And the young man repeated his response,

"I can do that. I thought to please Jesus you had to volunteer to be a missionary to Africa or something that you had to be some kind of martyr for the faith, but a cup of cold water? No problem. I can't start a church or preach a sermon, but I can give someone something to eat."

The chaplain said that he got new insight into the Scripture through the eyes of a 19 year old. The Christian faith can seem intimidating. The demands of Jesus can seem overwhelming. And yet from this young man's perspective the demands of the gospel seemed very doable.

When we started discussing this passage at Bible study this week we immediately started talking about situations in which it would be hard to show compassion. What about the prisoner who has done dastardly things? I don't think I could visit him.

What about those homeless people who are also criminals? It might be dangerous to help them.

Mother Theresa might have been able to be heroically compassionate, but I'm just not made that way. I have a family to take care of.

You see where this is going. We were taking the message of Jesus and making it harder. We were throwing up roadblocks in our mind and making excuses. But, suppose we didn't try to do everything? Suppose we just tried to do something?

I like that old saying, the longest journey begins with a single step. And the first step in following Jesus is to show compassion toward someone who needs it. It doesn't have to be a big thing. It doesn't have to be a heroic thing. It just has to be something.

I like the way our church does small things for those broken by life. We send a shoebox 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.

## WELCOME

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 a slave, 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.

#### HEAVENLY STORY, EARTHLY MEANING

These past few weeks I've talked about the definition of a parable. I said a parable is an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Today's lesson sort of reverses that model. Today's lesson is a heavenly story with an earthly meaning. As one person in our Bible study put it, "It's our marching orders from heaven."

That's true, but it's more than that. It's also a commentary on how we can find the presence of Christ here on earth.

Suppose a person told you, "I just don't feel close to the Lord any more." How would you respond to that complaint using this passage? I would say that we get close to the Lord by getting close to the people who need our help.

It's not that hard. We can do it. Each and every day we have the opportunity. But, often we are not aware of the opportunity.

Notice that in our lesson for today that the sheep and the goats have one thing in common. They did not perceive the presence of Christ in those who were broken by life. The Lord of lords and the King of kings was in disguise.

That's still true today. We often cannot see the importance of the little moments in our life. If we did, we would act differently.

But, knowing that Jesus is in even the smallest act of compassion can make a big difference in our life if we act upon that knowledge. When we do what faith requires, when we reach out and touch someone in love and compassion, we touch the human hand of God.

#### THE MESSIAH IS AMONG YOU

There's an old fable that conveys this message very well. It was about a monastery that had fallen on hard times.

“Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the hermitage and ask if by some possible chance the hermit could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The hermit welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the hermit could only commiserate with him: “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in all the nearby towns. So the old abbot and the hermit commiserated together.

The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?”

“No, I am sorry,” the hermit responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well what did the hermit say?” “He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered.

“We just commiserated and read the scriptures together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — it was something cryptic — was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one of us could it be?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often he is very right. Maybe the hermit did mean Brother Elred.

But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the hermit didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate.

As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it.

Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the hermit's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm."

When we look for the light of God's grace in all people, we begin to treat them differently. We learn to practice compassion and respect toward those we meet.

And that changes our community and us. We become the family of faith that we long to be. We become a place that is vibrant and alive and welcoming. Grace is not just a word but also something that you see and feel.

## RIGHT THEOLOGY VERSUS RIGHT ACTION

Like all of Jesus' stories there is always something that makes me feel a bit uneasy. In today's story it is how harshly the goats are judged. They didn't know that their lack of compassion would send them down the road to hell. But, it did.

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.

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.

## CHRIST THE KING

There was a resurrection on the third day. And the compassion of the risen Lord lives on in the compassion and service of his disciples.

His kingdom still comes. His will is still done. Christ is still king.

Today is the last Sunday in the church year. Next Sunday, believe it or not is the first Sunday of Advent.

But, today we look at the world from the mountaintop, the throne of grace. Today we say that Jesus is king of kings and Lord of lords.

But, what kind of king is this King Jesus? Is he a king who lords it over his subjects? No, that doesn't fit with either his words or his actions.

We do not see his glory in earthly power.

Instead, King Jesus is a King incognito. Like that old story the “Prince and the Pauper”, the royalty of God lives among us in disguise.

He lives where bodies are broken and blood is shed. He lives where people feel all alone. He lives where people are hungry and thirsty.

He lives where people are overwhelmed by guilt and despair. He lives where there is sorrow and pain.

And this gracious God sends his servants of peace, people like you and me to minister to those broken by life. We are given the opportunity to participate in this kingdom.

It is not impossible. We can do it. We just have to give what we have to meet the need that we see today.

God will take care of the rest.

Amen.