

³¹ “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 who 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 brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who 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.”

Response to the Word

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

P: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 25:31-46

11/26/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Darkness Turned to Light”

Pastor Amy Terhune

Some 300 years before the birth of Christ, the patron of the Island of Rhodes in Greece erected a statue in the harbor to honor the Sun God Helios. It was built in gratitude and thanksgiving for military victory. The statue, which came to be known as the Colossus of Rhodes, stood approximately 108-110 feet high, right at the entrance to the harbor. It was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world, symbolizing strength, great power, and dominion – a warning to any who would try to invade the city. Sadly, less than 100 years after it was built, the giant statue crumbled into the sea during an earthquake.

Some 2000 years or more after the Colossus of Rhodes fell, a poet here in the United States named Emma Lazarus wrote a poem entitled “the New Colossus” in which she contrasted the ancient statue with a new one going up in New York’s Harbor. These are the words of her famous poem.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

In the mind and words of Emma Lazarus, we're presented with a representation of our nation's power, not as one who towers in might to scare off armies, but rather, as one who shines a world-wide welcome to the least of these. Our power is our compassion. That is the light we shine to the world.

In our gospel lesson this morning, we hear a final teaching from Jesus. And when I say a final teaching, that's really what it is. This is it. Chapters 23 through 25 in Matthew are Jesus' last lecture, so to speak, offered in the temple in Jerusalem on Tuesday of Holy Week. On Wednesday, a woman will anoint him with oil for burial while Judas accepts 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus. On Thursday, Jesus and his disciples share a Passover meal before going out to the Mount of Olives to pray, where Jesus is arrested. On Friday, he is tried, convicted, and crucified.

So the final lesson he offers is one of what the final judgement looks like when all is said and done. When the Son of Man comes in all his glory – when time has ceased and the victory Christ won on the Cross at last ripples through time and history – when Jesus sits on the throne of his glory and all the nations are gathered before him, we're all going to face a final reckoning. And the criterion by which we'll be judged is how we treated others.

Mark Twain once famously said: "It's not those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." He is so right. This is some tough stuff. And it does trouble us. It's supposed to, I think. There is probably something wrong with anyone who is not a little bit troubled by this text.

Part of my discomfort with this passage is rooted in all the talk about "eternal punishment" and "eternal fire prepared for the devil", and the fact that God seems willing to send folks there who don't 'measure up'. That sounds kind of like 'works righteousness' to me, which is fancy terminology that basically means that one can 'earn' their way in by doing good things. But don't we profess 'salvation by faith alone'? That's the crux of protestant theology, right. It all comes down to the grace of Jesus Christ. Jesus' death paid the price. Jesus' resurrection paved the way. We are saved by faith alone.

Yes. But ask yourself: what is faith? Is it something that happens entirely within us? If we intellectually assert the Lordship of Christ, but it doesn't spill over into our behavior, is faith really alive within our hearts? John Wesley was quite clear on this: Yes, absolutely, we are saved by faith alone. That is, after all, how we enter relationship with God. But here's the thing Wesley understood. We don't live that relationship out in a vacuum. We live it out in a broken and needy world. So Wesley said, If we've been saved by faith, if God's grace has infused our lives, touched our hearts, if the Spirit is moving within us, then we're going to hear a call to respond to that love, that grace, that Spirit inside us. And our response will be to share that love, that grace, that Spirit with others. And the amazing thing is that the more we share it, the more we see and connect with God, the deeper our relationship with God goes, and in turn, the more we are driven to let the love of God shine through our lives.

Ideally.

But John Wesley also recognized that we don't live in an ideal world. Being human, we face the pressures, the needs, the temptations, the fears that go with our humanity. And they distract us from living our faith. It is not easy to live our faith in the world. It is hard work to love like Jesus. It's hard work to extend grace to those who hurt us. It's hard to work to understand those who are different. It's hard work to give generously when I fear the bills that coming in tomorrow's mail. It's hard work. Which is why he advocated for practices that intentionally stretch us. He called them "means of grace" and pointed out that there were some which feed us internally – prayer, fasting, bible study, and worship, to name a few. But there are also means of grace that feed others – servant ministry to the poor, the ongoing work of justice, and the building of peaceful society.

Which is where I really start struggling with this passage. You see, most people I know aren't all good or all bad. We're a mix – at least, I am. As much as I try to be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled, sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I'm mean, grouchy, combative, apathetic, anxious, stingy, untrustworthy, cynical, and arrogant. And too often, I'm left to repent after the fact rather than stopping myself from going off the rails in the first place. Which is so frustrating, and which leaves me wondering if Jesus will lump me in with the sheep or the goats. I don't always know which one I am.

This personal dilemma leads to further struggle in that this parable is often referred to as the judgement of the nations, which suggests, albeit subtly, that we are accountable not only for our personal behavior but, to some extent, for the society in which we live. And someone will cry that this is unfair, but the reality is that inequality is built into the systemic structures that undergird life as we know it. It's not my fault that when Bob and Brenda, both age 50, go into the ER complaining of the exact same symptoms, Bob is far more likely to be taken seriously. It's not my fault that when John and Jamal submit identical resumes, John is more likely to be interviewed. And it's not my fault that when applying for citizenship, Friedrich and his family are far more likely to get a visa than is Ferdinand and his family, or Fayid and his. None of it is my fault. But I say something because my faith calls me to speak out for a world that is more loving, more gracious, more just.

Today is the final Sunday on the church calendar, known as Christ the King Sunday. As holidays go, it's newer to Christian Practice, inaugurated by Pope Pius XI in 1925 to combat the Xenophobia and Nationalism that arose during the First World War. The church wanted to declare to those who follow Christ that our allegiance to Jesus is above all other allegiances, including nation and race. As Ruler and Reigning Monarch in our hearts and lives, it is Christ that should dictate our behavior and Christ's Kingdom that we should serve and build.

And when we look at the scripture that goes with this day, we find ourselves confronted with Matthew 25. And I suspect this passage has less to do with hellfire and damnation, and more to do with exposing our blindness. All of us drop the ball sometimes. All of us are broken and sinful. The question is: are we willing to see it? Are we willing to grow, to change, to learn? When new information comes to light, are we willing to let it impact us? Are we willing to see beyond our own interests? To be sensitive? To share voice and power and opportunity? Ultimately, do we see the gifts around us as limited or expansive? This passage is really a challenge to us – a call to open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to those around us. To pay attention.

"While co-hosting the Today's Show, baseball legend Joe Gargiola shared a story. He'd had a lousy night. He was feeling awful, in a hotel, away from home. He went to the drugstore to pick up extra-strength Tylenol, Kaopectate, an elastic knee support, some Dristan, a heating pad, and various other over-the-counter things to combat the cold and flu and general discomfort he was feeling. So imagine his shock as the clerk checking him out put all this stuff in a bag, handed it to him, and said, "have a nice day". [adapted from Thomas Lane Butts, *The Light Never Turns Green*, in illustrations for

Matthew 25:31-46 on www.Sermons.com.] Really? Clearly, he wasn't going to have a nice day. Sensitivity starts when we are able to see beyond ourselves. But it grows we learn to integrate sensitivity into our identity.

In the passage from Matthew, both the sheep and the goats are surprised. Jesus tells both groups, "I was hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison, and so on" and both respond, "Lord, when did we see you in that condition?" Neither group remembers these encounters. The sheep responded to a perceived need because servanthood was a part of who they were—it formed their very identity. They didn't have to think about it, really. The goats did not respond because they did not view themselves as connected to anyone else.

King Duncan offers fascinating insight into these differing identities. He writes, "Too many of us Christians have changed our Theology into Meology...meaning that my real Christian concern is for me...not for Thee. To many, the church exists to serve me...to meet my needs...a place to seek my salvation...to nurture my family...to worship my God. That is Meology. [from "Blessing, Testing, Response" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] What we really need to do, he argues, is to learn Theology, spelled t-h-e-e-o-l-o-g-y. Theology. And let me be clear: Theology can be learned. That's the whole point. We are in charge of shaping our own identities. We can learn to be sensitive to others; to make service our instinctual response. We can learn to see Christ in others, and to see others with eyes of Christ.

Which is really what this is about. Do we see Jesus in those around us? There's an old story told by Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners Ministries and the Sojourners Neighborhood Center in Washington, D.C., his hometown. This center stands just one-and-a-half miles from the White House. On any given day three or four hundred families stand in line outside the center to receive a bag of groceries which is critical to getting them through the week.

Just before the doors are opened and all the people come in, all those who help prepare the food join hands and say a prayer. For years, the prayer was often offered by Mary Glover, a black woman, a senior citizen, who knows what it means to be poor and knows how to pray. She prays like someone who knows to whom she is talking. She has been carrying on a conversation with her Lord for many, many years. She first thanks God for another day, "Another day to serve you, Lord," she says. And then Mary Glover may pray something like this, "Lord, we know that you'll be coming through this line today so, Lord, help us to treat you well." [as told in "Surprised Saints" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Mary Glover expects to see Jesus in those who come through the center. She knows who her king is. She expects to see the Kingdom take shape in her midst. She is looking for it. In the end, I don't think Matthew 25 is about a God that wants to punish and hurt. Rather, I think it's an invitation to join Christ in building a new world – one that is more sensitive, one that surprises us, one where Christ is seen and recognized in the faces of the other. Today we look to a King who is known and identified primarily by his service to others—by his sacrifices, his brokenness, his empathy. And so he meets us in our brokenness. He is present to us in the grit and grime of daily living—in politics, in economics, in social systems and personal weaknesses. But Christ the King Sunday also grows in us an awareness that in the eyes of the King, we are all needy. So he exchanges our sighing for songs and our darkness for light. Someday, the Mother of Exiles with her torch of imprisoned lightning will crumble to the sea just as Colossus did before her. But the kingdom of Love and light – the one that lives within us – the one where Christ reigns in Lordship – this kingdom doesn't crumble. Shine so holy and bright, O people! Shine for the Kingdom of God! Amen.