

The Least of These

Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Scripture

Matthew 24:31-46

“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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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, 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, 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.’ 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 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.’ 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, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.’ 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?’ 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.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

Sermon

These are his parting words—the last and final lesson. The great teacher, the rabbi, and master of the parable, Jesus, leaves us with this last formal act of teaching. This parable concludes his ministry of teaching and sums up the major theological themes of Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew is writing for his community, for his church gathered around Matthew, and only indirectly to us. Together, we get to listen in on what Matthew and Jesus want his church to know. And as we listen in, we try to discern what we need to know about what it means to follow Jesus today, what it means to be a faithful disciple in the school of Jesus.

If we're honest, we might wish that Jesus had left us with a parable that's easier to understand. Not that any of the parables are "easy," they're not meant to be. But this one is exceptionally difficult. They all make us uneasy for one reason or the other. That said, people have a lot of problems with this text: with the way it portrays Jesus as a judge, a judge offering no mercy to the poor goats. Are goats really less valuable than sheep? The thought of and the fear of "eternal punishment" doesn't warm the cockles of the heart. (There's a lot to cover here, but let me say that the question of "eternal punishment" will have to wait for another time. I'm not going to touch on that verse in this sermon.) I know left-handers who are not particularly fond of this text. It feels too binary; either one is a sheep or a goat, good or bad, left or right. There are no gradations from one to the other. Yes, there are so many reasons why text this makes us uncomfortable. It's difficult to discern what Jesus is really saying.

A surface reading might suggest that those who do good deeds are rewarded, and those who do not are punished—forever. Do good and get rewarded. Do bad and you're doomed. Jesus is often portrayed as a kind of cosmic Santa Claus. For "He knows if you've been bad or good/So be good for goodness' sake! O! You better watch out! You better not cry. You better not pout," for you-know-who is coming to town. If you're not good, you'll pay the price. Many, both Christian and non-Christian, believe that this is what the religious life is all about, sadly. God is a judge who has established certain laws we must follow. Religion's only function is to help people live a moral life, do good deeds, etc. The religious life becomes transactional. *I better be good and do good—whether I want to do it or not—to get the reward or escape the punishment.* This attitude, then, reduces the Christian life to a hollow or empty moralism. It reduces the Christian life into works, or rewards and punishments, thus ignoring the presence and effectiveness of God's prevenient grace and turns the parable into a simple morality tale. The text is then used to support or endorse conventional, cultural determinations of what is good, which might have little or nothing to do with the Christian life. If this was all there was to this parable, it's not saying anything all that profound because that kind of moralistic thinking can be found in many religions. [i]

A lot is going on in this parable, and we can't cover everything. Perhaps the most significant thing to notice is this: did you notice that the sheep, the ones who were praised because they provided food, drink, hospitality, clothing, and care, had no idea whatsoever that their acts of *compassion* were doing anything all that exceptional? They appear *unself-conscious*. They had no idea they were being "good" by ministering to the Son of Man. Then, the goats had no idea, either, that they were "bad. They had no clue that, in their *indifference*, they were neglecting the Son of Man. Both groups are shocked, stunned. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" (Mt. 25:44).

Both groups, the sheep and the goats, both the compassionate and the indifferent, were oblivious that their actions were being done unto the Lord. How? Where? In "the least of these." "The least." It might be easy to overlook this response, since we know this parable so well, but this is really a remarkable unveiling of something radically new. Where do we find the Lord? Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, Immanuel, God with us, is present in the world "in the least of

these"—in the least. Caring for the orphan, the widow, the sick, the refugee, all these commands are found in the Hebrew scriptures. But Jesus is saying something new and different. He says that when we care for the orphan and offer hospitality, we are actually caring for him, who is always close to "the least."

And so, who are "the least of these"? This is not a simple question to answer. We might say "the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger," anyone marginalized and in need. It sounds like Jesus is saying that the church should be out there caring for all the needs of the world, caring for all humanity. It also seems to be saying that the world, including the church, will be judged according to the compassion shown to those in need, the "least." And speaking of "the least," Jesus is also talking about his church, "members of my family," he says. This is code, meaning the church. The parable might even be saying that the world will be judged according to how it receives the church, "the least of these," that is, how it receives us. Now, this might be an inflated thing for us to claim in the world today, given the power, privilege, influence, and wealth of the church, even in our decline. But it's a way to read the text.

It's good for us to remember today that Jesus refers to his church in the parable as "the least." Not the "greatest," not the "best," not the "strongest." We need to remember that the early church was *the least of the least*, a minority within a minority in the Roman Empire. Matthew's church was a tiny minority and, therefore, very vulnerable in Roman society. They are not powerful in the eyes of the world. As a marginal group, they were identified with and had an intimate relationship with the most vulnerable and weak in society. They learned this from Jesus. We know that disciples of Christ could be found among people and in places of the greatest need, caring for the most vulnerable, such as the refugee. And this tiny minority, the church, as we heard earlier in Matthew's Gospel, was sent out to the world as salt and light—"Let your light shine—*little, tiny church*—let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16). Disciples of God's kingdom, or of the kingdom of heavens, as Matthew preferred to say, when we are servant of this kingdom, we are alive like yeast, leavening the lives of God's people (Mt. 13:33)—tiny, yet effective.

All this is important to remember today. Sure, the church can aspire to care for the needs of the "least" in the world, and we can burn ourselves out by doing so. But we also have to check our privilege and wealth by assuming that we are not "the least" but are only care for the "least." [ii] This attitude smacks of arrogance and inflation. And we need to remember that's we're not trying to be good in order to earn a reward in heaven, but because we love the Lord and the Lord loves us and because we want to be in the places and among the people where the Lord is, and to meet him there.

To love "the least" is to love Christ. Loving "the least" will lead us to Christ. When we love Christ, we will find him among "the least." This is why the early church served with humility, identifying with the vulnerable and marginalized, listening to their stories, sharing their pain, and imagining and discovering what it feels like to be "least." Because this was and remains the

way of Christ, our love for Christ leads us to "the least." And if it doesn't, then we need to examine our hearts.

This was, in part, what Dr. Martin Luther King (1906-1963) wanted the church to see, what he—in love—hoped the racist White church in America would discover and feel regarding the plight of Black Americans, fellow Black *Christians*. [iii] Indifference is the sin. Indifference prevents us from seeing Christ in "the least." Empathy, compassion is the way of grace, is the way of Christ.

If the church, in love, is going to try to care for the "least of these," we, as God's people, ought to know something about hunger and poverty and alienation and being imprisoned. We can't give to the world what we have not experienced ourselves. The church, too, is the "least of these." We experience Christ most profoundly in the places where empathy and compassion are required of us, here *in* this community, *in* our need, *in* our weakness, *in* our various hungers for healing and justice and righteousness, *in* our poverty of spirit, *in* our experiences of alienation and exile, when we are imprisoned, in our dependencies. We cannot give to the world without caring for one another as God's needy and beloved children—we, the church, we are God's needy and beloved children.

We meet Christ in the places and people of greatest need. Perhaps the biggest shock of the parable is that no one, neither the sheep nor the goats, recognized Christ because they were looking for him in all the wrong places, they assumed the Son of Man would be found in places of power and worldly glory and influence. But that is not God's way in the world.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we were told that when Jesus looked at the crowds of people following him, when he looked into their faces and hearts, into their lives, "he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt. 9:6). Matthew wants God's people to know that if you want to find Jesus, look among those who are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The church that is faithful to its Lord will be found in precisely the same place.

Sources

[i] Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 284.

[ii] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 212.

[iii] See, example, King's "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)," May 19, 1963.