

Matthew 25:31-46  
November 20, 2011

South Plains  
Christ the King

### Simplifying Judgment

Matthew's story of the sheep and the goats is a great attention-getter. I remember it best in the old language of the King James Version. "Inasmuch as you did unto one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto to me." When Jesus pronounces these words, we know he has trapped his listeners. And, of course, he has trapped us as well. All our middle class prejudices against people who wear ragged clothes and look sickly, against the homeless and especially prisoners, all our respectable preferences run smack into Jesus. Jesus, who not only loved the unlovely, became unlovely himself. He not only loved the naked, he let himself be stripped before the elite of Jerusalem. He not only loved the prisoner, he became a prisoner himself. Who can read this passage and not want to do something to help the less fortunate?

It's a great story to cap off stewardship season when we know that 10% of the budget is designated for missions. It's a great story for Thanksgiving or any time during the holidays when we're already feeling a little guilty about our abundance. It's a great story for cold weather as the shelters at the Haven and Pacem are opening for the winter.

This is a story that moves us. It catches our attention in part because it floats uncertainly between a myth, a parable and a vision of our future. We tell myths to reassure ourselves that the world is predictable, that problems have answers. The Thanksgiving story about the pilgrims and the Indians eating together is a good example of a myth. Whether it actually happened first in Massachusetts or in Virginia, whether it happened the way it's been depicted, the truth is that whenever we see kids in pilgrim hats with construction paper turkeys, we have an explanation for the beginning of Thanksgiving, and we are reassured that we are indeed a blessed and prosperous nation that knows how to give thanks. We need those values of sharing and gratitude affirmed in that story.

A parable, on the other hand, does not necessarily affirm us. Parables often upset the hearers. They turn our expectations upside down. They are intended to force us to re-think our values by creating anxiety and disrupting our world. The Occupy Wall Street movement is a kind of living parable that invites us to think again about our world.

The story of the sheep and the goats functions best as a vision, an apocalyptic picture of the last judgment. Like a myth, it affirms our expectation that kindness will be rewarded and indifference will be punished. But, it overturns any confidence that we might know in advance whether we've done enough good in the eyes of God. It's a vision of judgment when the world

stands before the ultimate Judge, the King of heaven and earth.

How does that affirming and disruption, that back and forth work in this vision? For starters, we are reminded that the shepherd who takes care of his flock is not only a gentle guide; he also separates the sheep from the goats. As listeners, we are confronted with the question, “Do I belong with the sheep who are blessed by the heavenly Father, or with the goats who are accursed?”

While we’re thinking about that, Jesus overturns our confidence that we can accurately predict the answer to that question. Jesus does not say that anyone who welcomes the stranger, clothes the naked, cares for the sick and visits the prisoners can rest easy on their laurels. After all, the righteous in this vision have absolutely no idea that their compassion would have eternal consequences. We might have expected that the unrighteous would be oblivious to spiritual consequences, but in this story, nobody seems to expect the cosmic implications of compassion. Everyone is surprised.

The ordinary kindness Jesus expects of us is so ordinary that we may not notice it. The people who test our compassion have ordinary needs. A few years ago, there was movie called “Ordinary People.” The movie followed a family who had a son with emotional problems that eventually made him suicidal. The tension in the

story was between the son’s efforts to regain his emotional health and the father’s resistance to either needing or getting help for his son. The father could not believe that an ordinary family with ordinary lives would need extraordinary help. I think that kind of blindness is widespread among us. Too often we cannot believe that our ordinary lives could place us in situations with extraordinary consequences. Can the ordinary helpfulness of providing a meal for the hungry really determine our eternal destiny?

The most obvious purpose of this vision is to destroy our complacency about God’s judgment. We have to wonder how we’re doing according to God’s scorecard. But that’s not the whole story. The surprised look on the faces of both the righteous and the unrighteous tells us that the heavenly scorecard is not like anything on earth. The demographics of heaven may be surprising. William Booth founded the Salvation Army with the goal of saving the cast-offs of respectable society. Vachel Lindsay’s poem imagines a scene right out of Matthew’s gospel vision, adding only a Salvation Army band to accompany Booth into heaven.

BOOTH led boldly with his big bass drum—  
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)  
The Saints smiled gravely and they said: “He’s come.”  
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)  
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,  
Lurching bravoes from the ditches dank,  
Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale—

Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail:—  
Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,  
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death—  
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

(Banjos)

Every slum had sent its half-a-score  
The round world over. (Booth had groaned for more.)

I can just imagine the surprise on the faces of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorians when Booth proclaimed that the street people of London were pouring into heaven ahead of good church people. For many of us, part of the hope of heaven is that we will be reunited with the best people we have known on this earth. I share that hope. However, if we take Jesus' vision even half-seriously, we will have to reckon with the likelihood that we will be surprised at whom God welcomes with open arms... and who is turned away.

The surprise has another, deeper purpose. It is that we can never resolve our anxiety about doing enough goodness. One Christmas I invited Ed, a recovering alcoholic from church, to eat Christmas dinner with us. Ed fit 90% of our stereotypes about alcoholics, except that he was not drinking. I failed to set any limits or to do adequate preparation. As a result, it was the longest and worst Christmas ever. If we were to repeat that invitation to every person we meet who is a stranger

and sick, we would burn out of compassion very quickly (and might burn out a marriage in the process).

After all, if Christ is disguised as every stranger on the street and every prisoner in the Regional Jail on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave, how could we not walk past on the other side of the street? If Christ is standing incognito in the line at the food pantry, will we not lose his face in the crowd? The best of us will get compassion fatigue and burn out. The disruptive function of this vision will lead us, no matter how sincere our faith, finally to ask, "Is there any assurance of my salvation?"

Or, to put the matter another way, perhaps this vision ultimately undermines our purpose in coming to worship this morning. We come seeking the assurance of God's love, the guidance of God's word. We come to put ourselves in the way of salvation. We want the Savior to find us and bring us home to himself. But why come to worship if a saving relationship with Jesus Christ depends upon feeding every hungry person we meet?

So, here's the real surprise of this little passage: there is no formula for salvation. We cannot do enough good deeds to deserve salvation. We cannot be thankful enough to receive mercy. We are thrown back again on the grace of God who does not pronounce us righteous and holy because we deserve it. We are his because he deserves it. It's all grace through faith. We have to trust God to make it right. And we can trust God to surprise us with grace.

Thanks be to God!

The good news is that when the day comes when we stand before him, all our doubts, fears and anxieties will find resolution in him. God will be more gracious than we have a right to expect. We can count on that surprise.