

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 19, 2023

Matthew 25:31-46

Friends, if you're joining us for the first time in a little while, I want you to know that we're moving through a worship series during this season of Lent entitled Parables that Prepare Us. We believe that Jesus's favorite method of teaching has something to do to our hearts and our minds and our spirits as we move through this season, that we might be more prepared to receive and to experience the mystery—Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ has come again. So this day we focus, as it is entitled in our bulletin, on the Last Judgment; or others would frame it as the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. So we'll read together from the Gospel of Matthew, the 25th chapter, beginning the 31st verse.

‘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 that 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 who are members of my family, you did it to me.” 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; 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.’

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

In 1971 Gustavo Gutierrez published his seminal work, entitled *A Theology of Liberation*. It is not hyperbole to say that his work altered the trajectory of Christianity. Gutierrez brought to the world's consciousness the reality of extreme poverty and systemic injustice in Latin America. Among other things his work led to a renewed realization of Christ's presence amongst the poor and the oppressed, especially in their struggle to end poverty and oppression. From his work we derive a significant theological claim through what Gutierrez called God's preferential option for the poor.

He wrote, "A spirituality of liberation will center on a conversion to the neighbor, the oppressed person, the exploited social class, the despised ethnic group, the dominated country. Our conversion to the Lord implies this conversion to the neighbor. To be converted is to commit oneself lucidly, realistically, and concretely to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Christians have not done enough in this area of conversion to the neighbor, to social justice, to history. They have not perceived clearly enough yet that to know God is to do justice. They have yet to tread the path that will lead them to seek effectively the Peace of the Lord in the heart of the social struggle."

Gutierrez's understanding of Liberation Theology grew from scripture, most specifically this passage from The Gospel according to Matthew.

"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."

What will differentiate them, the listener might have been wondering if they heard Jesus tell this story, paint this picture. 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. For I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me."

At first blush, it's not that difficult of a list to fulfill. In fact, often we look for really concrete things to do as followers of the way of Jesus Christ, and this one lays out a pretty straightforward list. None of these require difficult ethical decisions. We are simply to feed and give a cup to drink, to visit, and to clothe, and to welcome. In fact, it is so simple—this calling, this differentiating factor between the sheep and the goats, that the righteous, scripture tells us, don't even know what they've done.

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“When was it, Lord, that we saw you hungry and gave you something to eat? Thirsty and we gave you something to drink? Naked and clothed you? Sick or imprisoned and visited you? Anytime you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

And if the parable just stopped there....

But then Jesus turns to those, he turns our attention to those at the left hand of the king; and those, scripture tells us, will be shown into a different sort of eternal reality; and they will also wonder when it was they entertained the Lord and didn't even know it. The listener, of course, in the time of Jesus would have had a difficult time figuring out what the purpose of the parable was. They also would have had a difficult time, and it's a challenge that we have to entertain this morning as we worship the Lord together, the challenge of this parable, of this story, this teaching of Jesus is to locate ourselves in it.

There are those at the right hand and those at the left hand.

One of my favorite professors in seminary, David Bartlett, was fond of saying, “If you read the gospel and you're the good guy, you're reading it wrong.”

We have to locate ourselves, and maybe if we're feeling high and mighty this morning, we imagine ourselves on the right hand of the king.

Much ink has been spilled, of course, over where it is that Christians locate themselves. What qualifies them as sheep? What disqualifies them that they might be named goats? But as Jeanene so rightly pointed out to our children not so long ago, this parable insists on something deeper from us, something more impactful, something more significant, something that will actually not just be significant for this teaching, but for many others. It insists on the non-binary.

Instead of struggling over where we position ourselves, sheep or goats, it might be better for us to imagine that we are multitudes, that we represent both of these factions all at once.

This week Richard Rohr's Daily Devotional that comes to my inbox focused on Teresa of Avila. Perhaps you're familiar with this idea of “all shall be well and all shall be well in all manner of things shall be well.”

Teresa was a saint and not figuratively. She's been sainted, but the author of the devotional midweek this week said she made mistakes as well as we do. Some mistakes she apologized for profusely, others she refused to admit until years later. Like us she was petty but also generous, irritable but also loved unconditionally. She attributed everything to her progress along the path of following Jesus Christ.

The key of course was she never ceased showing up for the spiritual work.

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If we allow ourselves to be led by the spirit of Christ as we explore this passage today, we might be honest enough to reckon with the times that we see ourselves and we experience ourselves at the left hand of the King. Those who have neglected to see Christ in the eyes of our neighbor let people go hungry literally and spiritually, let people remain naked in our presence when we have more than enough clothing, let people go home parched when we have, as Christ tells us, some Living Water to share.

We also on our best days might find ourselves as sheep, those who are willing to take a little bit more time, pay a little bit more attention to recognize that we are entertaining the Divine every time we entertain our neighbor. We are both of course.

A dear friend and mentor of mine pastored one of the most significant churches in our denomination. He also, in the midst of his ministry, had what we might call a significant moral failing, which led to his resignation from that call. He tells the story of the first Christmas Eve that he spent outside of a pulpit in more than 35 years.

He was walking the streets of New York, feeling more alone than he had ever felt before,

Feeling like he had just committed the last three plus decades of his life to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and yet he found himself alone, unable to entertain the companions of fellow Christians. He was walking the streets, and he passed by a man who was lying on the steps of a church around the corner from his former church. "Hey, I know you," the man said. "I know you."

My friend, my mentor, ignored the initial calls, worried about this man, until he got a few more steps, and the man kept yelling, said, "I know you. You're the pastor who took on the city of New York so that I could sleep right here." The city was working as hard as they could to eradicate those who were unhoused from sleeping on the steps of churches. Churches were safe sanctuaries for the poor, for the unhoused. The city was trying to regulate that away, take away what little space there was left in the city.

And so this friend of mine had gathered with a number of other pastors, and they had advocated at the city level to allow for people to continue to sleep on the steps, as bare a floor as you might imagine, but still someplace that felt like sanctuary.

The man said to my friend, "I want you to know I really appreciate you, what you did for us. You made us know that we were loved and cared for."

We're sheep and we're goats.

We're those with deep moral failings and those who on our best day can reflect the love of Christ in the world.

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The mistake that I know I make more often than not is that I think I'm going to experience God in the quiet time when I'm up early and able to entertain God in my own head. That time doesn't ask much of me but a cup of coffee and a little bit of silence.

But we can't be in our heads during this season of Lent, because the righteous people teach us that they don't even cognitively recognize their good work.

We can't be in our head because the hope of Jesus Christ is that we might experience God when we experience the hungry and the bereft, the sick and the imprisoned. I don't know about you but my issue is that more often than not I construct my day so that I might never encounter the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned; and in so doing I outsource the faithful practice to someone else to be about the work of Christ, but I also never allow myself to encounter the King. There's something vulnerable and difficult about caring for the needy, but also something that deeply blesses us.

Gutierrez says that God has a preferential option for the poor; that Christianity, if it is to call itself such, cannot pass by the hungry or the thirsty, the naked or the imprisoned; that Christianity, if it's supposed to actually be about reflecting Christ in the world, has to pay attention.

The parable does that for us this morning, and you might be wondering how in the world is this story preparing us for the coming of the Paschal mystery.

I'll offer two options for you this morning.

First is to remind us, if we need reminding, that our fidelity to our God will be measured, indeed is measured, by our fidelity to our vulnerable neighbors.

Our fidelity to the one who was, who is, and who is to come will be measured by how it is we see Christ in the eyes of our neighbor.

If there's a second lesson for us, it might be that it encourages us to be honest, more honest than we've been, to worry less about trying to find ourselves in the sheep camp or the goat camp and be more honest about finding ourselves in both, because what Holy Week is going to ask of us just a week from now, what Holy Week is going to ask of us is that we see ourselves not just in the cheers of the crowd that welcomes Jesus triumphally into Jerusalem, but also in the ones who are skeptical and the ones who question and the ones who worry about this one who is overturning things. And if our faith is asking anything of us, it is not just to see ourselves around the table with Christ on Maundy Thursday as those who share joyously in the meal, but to see ourselves also as those who betray Christ. And if our faith is asking anything of us on Good Friday, it is not to imagine ourselves as those who sit weeping at the foot of the cross after Jesus has passed, but those who abandon him long before that. And if our faith is asking anything of us on Easter morning, it is not to see ourselves in the women who get up early to adorn the body of

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Christ, but to see ourselves as the skeptical ones who don't even bother going and then don't believe the story of those who did.

We're sheep and we're goats. On our best days maybe we're at the right hand; on most others we're at the left. The good news of the Gospel, the good news of the Gospel is that we follow a good shepherd, one who draws us in, aware that we are multitude, aware that we hold within us all goodness and all brokenness, and that one day we will stand before the King. The King will draw from within us all that is broken, all that is neglectful, all that doesn't care for the needy, will draw that from us and purge that part of us by fire, and then welcome the goodness that dwells within us as well.

In this season of Lent as we prepare to receive and experience the Paschal mystery, I wonder if we might challenge ourselves to draw and understand our fidelity with our creator to be the fidelity that we show to our vulnerable neighbor, that we might loosen this binary understanding of who we are, that we might be open to the grace of God.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.