

Face to Face

Matthew 25:31-46

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 26) 2023

The Reign of Christ

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*For active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with love in dreams.*

*Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov**

If you are looking for God, where do you go? Where do you look if you're looking for Jesus?

Most of us would go to church and to Sunday morning worship. When we join our voices together in singing the great hymns of our faith or hear the Word preached, we are likely to say that's where we found Jesus. Those of us raised evangelical and old Southern Baptists might take it another step and say we know that Jesus is in our hearts. Those of us raised Roman Catholic or Episcopalian or Lutheran will likely say that Jesus is present in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. I know folks of the more Fundamentalist persuasion who have told me that Jesus is between the covers of the big old leather-bound Bible that they carry. Beyond that, I know some of us might answer that Jesus is found somewhere in the mountains on a cold clear morning, or watching the sun rise over the beach somewhere.

And each and every one of these answers is true to a certain extent. We do affirm that Jesus becomes part of our lives and lives within our hearts. We do believe that something very sacred happens in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist or Holy Communion and that we meet Jesus Christ there. Furthermore, Jesus does show up in worship and during the music and the sermon. And we even

agree that we can meet Jesus in the pages of our ancient book, the Bible. And I agree that there are times and places outdoors where Jesus walks right beside us. All of these places are good places to meet Jesus.

Nevertheless, while Jesus resides in any number of these place, none of these places are Jesus' "primary residence." To find where Jesus lives and hangs out the most, we need to listen to our Gospel reading this morning from Matthew 25 and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats and the Last Judgment. You know the parable. It is one of Jesus' most well-known parables but perhaps his most uncomfortable. It is a parable of judgment that challenges us.

Jesus says, "When the Son of Man (Matthew's favorite term for the Messiah which can also be translated as the "Truly Human One"). When the Son of Man comes in his glory... in other words, the camera pans away and we get a wide-angle shot of all and everything. Before the Lord of all history and all his angels, are gathered all the people of all the nations of the earth.

According to shepherds of the ancient Near East and shepherds of today's Near East, it is quite common for sheep and goats to be mixed together during the day during grazing or moving from one pasture to another. But at the end of the day, the shepherd has to separate the sheep and the goats. Sheep, with their woolly coats, do not need to be in close quarters and usually do well in an open-air sheepfold or sheep pen. On the other hand, goats get cold easily and need to be close to one another and if possible, need to be under shelter. So the sheep and the goats are separated.

Likewise, Jesus tells us that the Lord of all history will act as the Great Shepherd and will judge and separate all people like sheep and goats. Then the sheep are blessed, and the Lord says, "Inherit the kingdom that has been prepared

for you from the foundation of the world.”

And then we discover the basis of the Lord’s judgment: “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, and I was in prison and you visited me.”

The goats, on the other hand, instead of blessing, are cursed. The basis of which is that they did not do any of these acts of mercy the Lord of all history talks about. They did not feed the hungry and did not give drink to the thirsty, and did not welcome and include strangers, or clothe the naked or care for the sick or visit those in prison.

Now partly, the parable is a challenge in that the listeners to Jesus discover that the judgment of the Lord of all history is whether the poor and helpless are helped. On Judgment Day, the question is not about if you acquired the most money or how much power you have or how big a Bible you own or how big is the church you attend or even if you attend church. The criteria is whether one helped those without power, those on the margins, those impoverished, those without health care, without proper shelter, without nutrition... those considered outsiders, the “other,” “those people,” those not welcome.

Thomas Jefferson said, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.”

But we’re just getting started in this parable. It gets more interesting. The Truly Human One, the Lord of all history, says that he was those “other” people. He was the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.

It’s not simply whether the sheep and the goats fed the hungry or cared for

the sick and so on. It is that the Lord of all history, the King of Kings, Jesus Christ himself was hungry and sick and in prison. Jesus himself is the left-out, the ground-down, the abused, those without healthcare, living on the streets... And the issue becomes that when the sheep or goats cared for or did not care for those Jesus refers to as “the least of these my family” then the sheep and goats cared for or did not care for Jesus Christ.

Both the sheep and the goats are stunned. Both groups exclaim, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison?” “Lord, we didn’t know! We never saw you! We were looking for the Lord in all the wrong places!”

“While we were praising you in church, we had no idea that you were outside dumpster diving for food to eat.” “While we passed a bill making crossing the border a state crime, subject to prison and not simply deportation, we did not know we were arresting you.” “When I hit that woman, and it was just a little slap because I lost my temper, I did not know it was you that I was hitting.” “When we raided that house and arrested and deported that mother, and separated her from her small children, we did not know it was you we were deporting, and we did not know it was you we were shuffling off to Child Protective Services.”

This is one hard parable.

Jesus does not ask whether we helped pass better policies or provided a new system or worked to change the rules or came up with more nutritious and cheaper food sources or provided water purification tablets for a year or changed immigration policy or did research on prison recidivism rates or developed a new vaccine.... All these things are good. But these are not the questions asked by Jesus Christ, at the End of all history.

Jesus does not ask us what we did *for* those in need of mercy. The question is how we were *with* those in need of mercy. That little word *with* is the crucial difference. And it is why this parable is so hard.

Early in both the novel and the movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird* there is an important scene that sets a primary theme in the story. Scout, the little girl in the story, has just been corrected about her behavior toward a classmate, Walter Cunningham, who was over for dinner. During the meal, Walter, who comes from a poor farm family, asks for the syrup, and then pours it all over his meal. Scout blurts out, “What in the Sam-Hill are you doing, Walter?! Atticus, he’s gone and drown-ed his dinner in syrup...” Scout ends up on the porch with her father, Atticus, who eventually says to her, “First of all, if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. You have to climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

And at the very end of the story, after Scout learned who Boo Radley really was and what his life was like, and after all the injustices toward the black man Tom Robinson, the grown-up Scout, who is the narrator, says, “Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough.”

Atticus was talking about what we call empathy. Empathy is the ability to enter into and share the experience of another person without losing our sense of our own self. It is participatory rather than abstract. It is face-to-face encounter rather than generalized and distant. It is the very heart of the Incarnation. It is what Jesus did and who he was. And everything else he did grew out of his empathetic-in the flesh-participation in our lives and in the lives of the least of these.

And for me, this is what is so hard about this parable. Jesus is telling us there is no substitute for face-to-face relationship with people in need. And while we may do any number of things that help change policies, or run agencies, or teach classes, or preach sermons, or organize campaigns, or whatever, all these things are to grow out of our being alongside with persons in need.

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown did a study some years ago on the work of Holocaust survivor and writer Eli Wiesel. Brown explored post-Holocaust options of God. In other words, during the Holocaust where was God? Was God a victim, or perhaps God was with the executioners, or was God a spectator? What do you do if your God is always in control and if Jesus is always in charge, and the Holocaust comes along? Brown concludes God is participant – the God who engages “in the ongoing struggles against the forces of evil.” (see Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, p. 158). In Jesus Christ, God was involved, with, participating alongside the sufferers of the Holocaust – being with the least of these.

You want to know where the God we know in Jesus Christ is? He is with the least of these. Jesus is involved. And here’s the deal: if Jesus Christ is involved, so must we. According to this parable our very salvation is contingent upon whether we are involved alongside Jesus, with the least of these.

I know a Methodist bishop who schedules a certain amount of time each week to volunteer in a homeless shelter feeding people and sitting beside them in conversation during the meals because she knows that otherwise, all her time will be overwhelmed with meetings, travel, phone calls, conference calls, Zoom meetings, and dealing with administration. Being with the least of these keeps her Christian, she says.

This is where Matthew's favorite term for Jesus comes in. Matthew refers to Jesus as the "Son of Man" while Luke prefers "Son of God." As I said earlier, the old term, Son of Man, can be translated as "Truly Human One." What Matthew is trying to help us with, is that Jesus Christ shows us how to be human. Yes, we believe that Jesus Christ was fully divine. To say, "Son of God" is a kind of shorthand for Christ's divinity. But we also believe that the Incarnation says that Jesus is fully human, too, and furthermore, shows us what a real human being looks like.

Part of what that means is that involving ourselves with and alongside those who suffer keeps us human. And when we abstract ourselves from such relationships, distance ourselves, look the other way, we slowly begin to become less human.

And I know and so do you, that empathetic incarnational face-to-face relationships are time consuming. It's hard, becomes complex, and can overwhelm. It is a reminder of Sam Wells' insight that some things are not problems to be solved but mysteries to be entered into. And we're a "get it done" kind of church. We like to solve problems and fix things and fix people.

And I also know how easy it is to lose our sense of self when we get overly involved in the complexities of people's lives. It is why we talk about boundaries and why we need each other checking up on each other. It is partly why we gather every Sunday morning even as we also serve alongside the least of these – so we can keep ourselves grounded and know who we are in Christ.

But with all the boundary keeping and the rest, on Judgment Day we'll still be asked whether or not we did it to the least of these. Whether we were with them.

In 2005 Julius Earl Ruffin was released from a Virginia prison after twenty-one years behind bars for a crime he didn't commit. An all-white jury convicted him of assaulting a white woman solely based on her identification of him as her assailant. After DNA testing, he was released.

Ruffin's accuser, Ann Meng, did an amazing thing. She wrote to him expressing her deep regret in misidentifying him and then she testified on his behalf at the hearing to compensate him for his wrongful imprisonment. She said, "I feel personal responsibility for Mr. Ruffin's incarceration. However, our system of criminal justice also must bear some responsibility. There was no one on this jury who saw themselves or their son or their brother, when they looked at Mr. Ruffin" (cited in Will Willimon, *Fear of the Other*, p. 12-13).

In other words, no one had empathy for Mr. Ruffin.

Furthermore, no one had, what French Catholic philosopher Rene Girard calls, "disruptive empathy," (see Girard, *The Scapegoat*). Not only are we with and identify with those who are suffering, but we are moved to do something about it. Disruptive empathy refuses to just let things happen, is unwilling to be a bystander, and decides to become involved. Disruptive empathy would have seen Mr. Ruffin as a brother or son but would have also done something about it.

You will remember that the Missions Committee went to the border last summer and worked alongside other volunteers in with immigrants coming into the United States. One of the next steps from the Missions Committee is that we are pursuing becoming sponsors for a family needing a place to live and work, while they get on their feet and prepare to go wherever they are going. The committee is researching legal issues, financial, housing, and so on. But our goal is to sponsor a family and work with them. You'll be hearing more.



Furthermore, the Youth Group is planning a mission trip for next summer to Albuquerque, NM in which they too will be doing immigrant ministry.

In other words, the Missions Committee and Youth are leading us – all of us – to become involved, to participate alongside families coming across the border needing help, needing hospitality.

Union Theological Seminary professor Donald Shriver says he participated in a study several years ago on how people become involved with showing hospitality to the stranger and how they sustain it. Shriver said the study discovered three things about the people involved: (1) they had a vision of what we need to be doing as a society, as a people to be hospitable; (2) they had a trusted community of support; and (3) they participated in the long-haul struggle for justice and mercy. Furthermore, all three of these characteristics were connected. Without one, the other two fell apart. Shriver concluded: “The creation of an ethical community is what saves people; it’s absence is what dooms them” (see Donald W. Shriver, Jr., review of Victoria Barnett’s *Bystanders*, in the June 2011 *Christian Century*).

This is church. It’s what we’re to be about – a community in Christ being with those who are overlooked and ignored, outcast and beaten down. This is how we want to raise our children and it who we are baptized into. And according to Jesus, it is how we are saved.

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