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THE MARK OF A CHRISTIAN

Matthew 25:31-45

Most of us gathered for worship would call ourselves Christians, would we not? So what's the mark of a Christian? How would people know to identify us as Christian? We may be far from perfect, but at least we should know what we're aiming for, no? What's the measure, the standard, the mark?

There are some obvious external things that would identify us as Christian. Some of us wear crosses or other symbols. We attend church in person or online and we support a community of faith financially. The more intentional of us read the bible or other devotional literature and we pray. We donate to charities as an expression of our faith. We decorate for Christmas and Easter.

But you know, Jesus wouldn't really think about any of these things as very distinctive. Part of it is that Jesus lived in a time and place where everybody had a minimum of religion. It's like the way it was in Canada a generation or two ago. Most people identified as Christian, most every Christian was connected to a church and most Christians did all those external things that communicated Christianity. Today, when this is no longer the case, the last thing I would want to do is discourage any of these practices. At least they communicate a minimum of connection to Christian faith.

But Jesus was pushing for more. Jesus was claiming that we are made for more. Jesus was declaring, in fact, that unless we go for more, we are losing out on the core essence of who we're made to be not only as Christians, but as human beings. Some of us may feel great about ourselves. We may feel secure in our finances, our relationships, our family, our health. But just because we feel good, doesn't mean there's not a whole other world of experience and conviction we're missing out on. That's the world of experience Jesus was after. And he had an easier time drawing in those who had nothing to lose because life was pretty rough for them. It's the comfortable, cozy and self-satisfied types Jesus had a problem with. That's when he started talking about judgement. It's like electrical current on a heart that's stopped. If we're not pursuing greater depths in our connection to life's true essence, then a jolt may help.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Jesus taught using parables. Parables are imaginary stories with a twist. They're all about the true mark of a Christian.

The parable for today opens with a scene, an imaginary scene in a time beyond. There is a last judgement. Most everyone in Jesus' day believed in a last judgement. That's how the current world order would end. But then, a new order would begin with God in charge. There would be a last judgement first. Everyone would be held to account. What have you believed and how have your beliefs shaped the content of your life, your decisions, your priorities and commitments, your relationships, the way you have dealt with your mistakes and the mistakes of others toward you? All of it would be measured and judged before perfect justice and perfect mercy.

Jesus' talk about a last judgement is not very original. As already mentioned, most everyone in his time and place believed it. Rather, what's original in Jesus' teaching is who's on the right and who's on the left, so to speak. Those who are comfortable, cozy and self-satisfied because they think they're so great and are more than ready to judge, discount and condemn others, better watch out. God does not share their perspective. God's standards of righteousness are quite different. So what are God's standards according to Jesus?

There are several points Jesus makes in this parable. **1) First**, not everybody who claims to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, a good and righteous person, is necessarily so. Words can be cheap if there's no concrete evidence in life to back it up. Even though it's not for us to judge, there is a difference between good and bad, better and worse. There are standards, and as Christians we should be clear on what those standards are. Even as we should love everyone and judge no-one, we should know the difference between good and bad and what they look like in real life.

2) Second, Jesus begins to clarify the difference. And the difference is measured most clearly in how we treat the weakest and most vulnerable in our world. Why? Because the weakest and most vulnerable cannot reciprocate in any direct way, nor are they always attractive to us. In order to love them tangibly and practically, we have to overcome our self-interest (you know - I'll scratch your back more readily if I hope to get my back scratched in some way in return). We also have to overcome our distaste and repulsion. It's much easier to love lovely people, attractive people, kind, innocent and hard-working people. It's much harder to love those who are the

authors of their own misfortune, the miserable, the criminal, the pathetic defeatists, the sickly, the hopeless whiners. Not only will they not reciprocate our love, but they'll also push all the wrong buttons in us.

The list Jesus gives is a standard list in his day of the losers and misfits of his society – the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the naked, the criminal, the drug addicts and carelessly infected. These are the losers of the world. And too often, they are the authors of their own misfortune. Sure they can blame others and they can blame God, but what about their own responsibility? They should not whine and complain but do something constructive to get out of their misery. Then we'd be more inclined to help them. In Jesus world just as much as in our own, people like this would be seen as condemned by God and by life and therefore deserving of our condemnation as well. But Jesus says no!

And he says something even more shocking. To see them truly as human beings not just losers and misfits, is to see Christ in them. If you really love them, you love Christ and if you really love Christ you love them. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. "In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it unto me." The crucifixion of Jesus wasn't just about an innocent man unjustly punished because those in power felt threatened by his popularity and antagonistic to his vision of God. No. The cross was also interpreted as God in Jesus taking on the negativity, misery, hatred and contempt of the world and not throwing it back. It's about compassion and forgiveness, generosity of judgement and mercy.

And these virtues only mean something when there's lots to forgive and be generous about. Love is cheap unless there are great obstacles to overcome in our loving. That's when it grows strong and hearty. If love is the highest mark of being a Christian than love is most clearly tested as authentic when a person can love those who have nothing to give back and those who are ready to stab you in the back even as you are kind to them. To refuse to be triggered by their evil, to be shaped in your love by God not by others... this requires supernatural grace at work in your heart. That's what makes a Christian. We are all imperfect. We all need to grow in this. But let's be clear on the measure and standard. It is love, and love is most powerful when the person to be loved is not easy to love.

3) But third, Jesus takes it even a step further. The difference between those on his right and those on his left is not just knowing what real love looks like on the outside. It's also about what real love looks like on the inside, in the

heart. The most revealing part of this parable is in the response of the righteous to Jesus commendation. “When was it that we saw you Jesus and did all these loving things to you?” Clearly, in loving the sick and vulnerable, the criminal and the dirty, hopeless losers and so on, the righteous are acting from their heart for no other reason than love itself. It is part of who they are. There is no motivation other than love. They are not doing it to receive anything. They are not doing it because people are attractive and lovely and draw it out of them.

But they are also not doing it because God would pat them on the back and reward them. They’re not doing it because they’ve discerned Jesus hidden in all the weak and vulnerable. They don’t know it’s Jesus they’re ministering to yet. No. They have done what they have done because it has become a central part of who they are, their inner identity. Their deepest core and essence as created by God out of love and for love, and the way they live their lives, have come together in a wonderful integration of faith and action, head, hands and heart. Isn’t this beautiful?

Well, for most of us life is a little messier, a little more un-integrated. We do bad things to other people because they rub us the wrong way. We make judgements all the time as to who deserves what and how much. Other times we feel burnt because someone else proves to be undeserving of all the love we’ve shown them. They have not reciprocated in any way, failed to express gratitude and appreciation, and sometimes they have even turned on us for helping them.

Other times we have felt much better about helping other people, but inside us we have to admit there are conflicting motivations, some more pure and some less pure. We do care about what other people think, about optics – what people see. We care about pleasing others and we care about how we may promote our own goodness or advancement through our good works. We care about reward. And we also care about guilt and fear punishment. We sometimes do what we do because the consequences would be worse. We’d rather serve a particular person and deal with a particular situation than deal with the aftermath and the consequences.

But we also have our moments of pure grace do we not? What moments make you most fulfilled as a human being before God? Jesus wants to offer the clearest standard, the strongest measure of that. To love others and to act on that love with the strongest motivation being that this is what life is about and

such loving is the most important value in the world – this is living life to the full.

So what is the mark of a Christian? The greatest single mark of a Christian is love. And love is most powerful and real when it is expressed and lived independent of any other motivations or fulfillments than love itself.

But doesn't Jesus know that we will fail? Doesn't he know that for all our best intentions and efforts we will mess things up too often? Well but that's why the gospel is all about forgiveness. It's about the costly love of God toward us. That's why the climax of the narrative of the gospel is the cross. According to the world the cross is all bad news. It's about failure, defeat, humiliation. But for those of us who are clear on what the highest mark of being a Christian and a human are, the cross is the greatest victory because it is the most powerful lived expression of what love is. And love saves beginning with forgiveness. If we really begin to internalize divine forgiveness in our hearts, then we will be empowered to go back to the drawing board, inspired to love better and more consistently than we do. And as we rise and then sometimes fall again, we drink in the infinite waters of forgiveness and try to love again.

May each of us here find God's call to love empowering not discouraging. May we find healing for our broken hearts so that we may be renewed in love and energized to love.... For in as much as we love others who are the least of these, we do it unto Christ himself.

Amen.