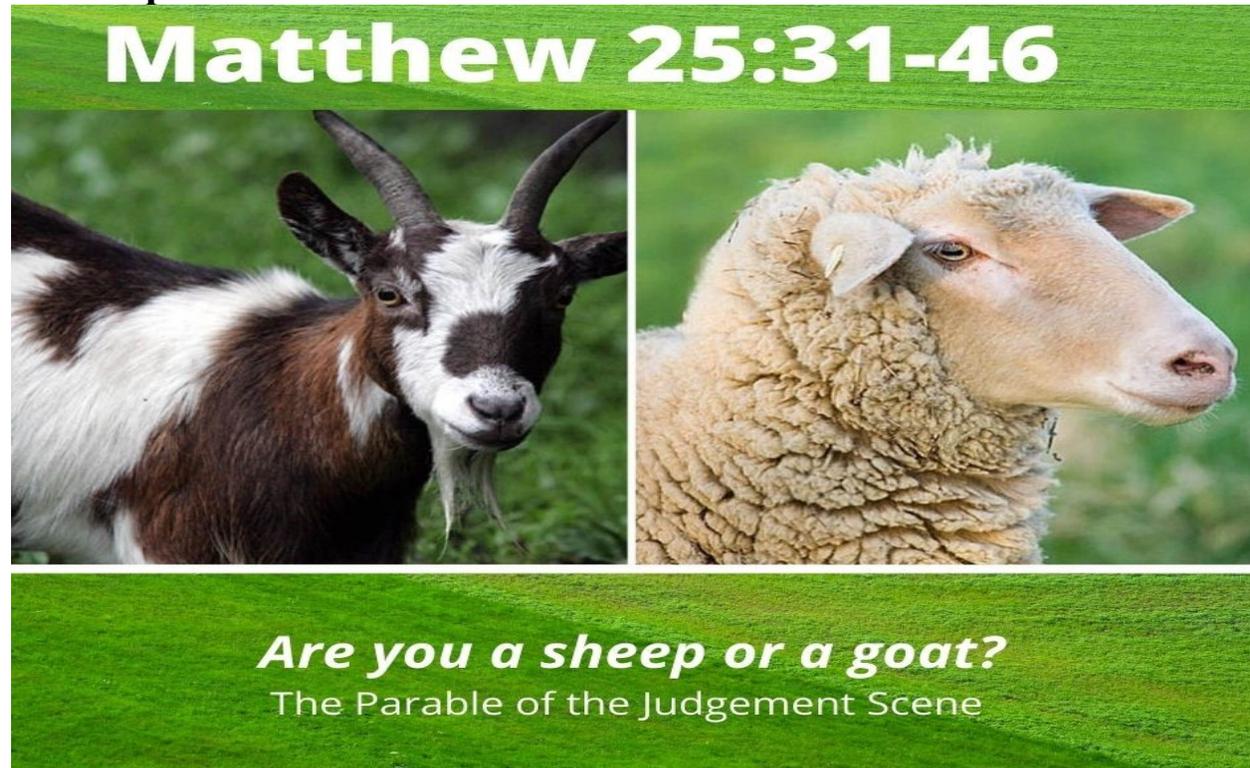


Worship at Home Guide



November 22, 2020

34th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gathering Question/Gathering Music

Opening Sentences Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, you created the heavens and the earth, and humankind in your image. Teach us to discern your hand in all your works and to serve you with reverence and thanksgiving. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn #268 "Crown Him with Many Crowns"¹

Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon the throne;
hark, how the heav'nly anthem drowns all music but its own!
Awake, my soul and sing of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity.

Crown him the Lord of love; behold his hands and side,
rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified:
no angel in the sky can fully bear the sight,
but downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.

Crown him the Lord of peace, whose power a scepter sways
from pole to pole, that wars may cease, absorbed in prayer and praise.
his reign shall know no end; and round his pierced feet
fair flowers of paradise extend their fragrance ever sweet.

Crown him the Lord of years, the potentate of time;
creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime.
All hail, Redeemer, hail! For thou hast died for me;
thy praise shall never, never fail through out eternity.

¹*Public domain. This text by Matthew Bridges, 1851, is SO familiar it is easy to miss all its paradox, mystery suffering and beauty; it rewards careful reading and meditation outside of corporate worship. The composer, George Job Every, a chapel organist at Windsor Castle, had much experience in creating a “royal” sound.*

Prayer of Confession

Jesus said: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled. Trusting in God’s grace, let us offer to God our prayers...

Jesus said: Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
In the name of Jesus the Christ, receive God’s mercy as we are forgiven! Amen.

Hymn #753 “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace”²

Make me a channel of your piece. Where there is hatred let me bring your love. Where there is
injury, your pardon, Lord, and where there’s doubt true faith in you.

Make me a channel of your peace. Where there’s despair in life let me bring hope. Where there is
darkness, only light, and where there’s sadness ever joy.
Though popular opinion credits this prayer to St. Francis of Assisi, the earliest known printing
was in a French religious magazine in 1912.

²*Text: Anon. circa 1912; adapt. By Sebastien Temple, 1967. Music: Sebastien Temple, 1963.
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Scripture/Meditation

Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 25:31-46

The Son of Man Will Judge the Nations

“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 those 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 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.

Questions for Reflection and Discernment

1. What questions do you have for Matthew as the storyteller?
2. What question(s) would you like to ask Jesus about this teaching?
3. What word or phrase catches your eye/ear in this text?
4. This is a text known as the "Great Judgment". Can it also be an invitation?
5. In the context of Matthew, Jesus' audience is his disciples. Who is Matthew's audience?
6. Which of these needs do you find yourself drawn to in terms of helping to meet?

Anthem

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O Lord, strengthen our faith. Nourish it with passion and love towards you....

Nourish it with passion and love for our neighbors as we offer prayers for them...

Nourish it with passion and love for our enemies as we offer prayers for them...

Nourish it with passion and love for the world...hear now our prayers for the world...

Nourish it with passion and love for ourselves...hear now our prayers for ourselves...

Almighty God, whose Word we trust, whose Spirit equips us to pray, we continue to pray saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Hymn “God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me”³

God, be the love to search and keep me; God be the prayer to move my voice; God, be the strength to now uphold me: O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me.

³*Text/Music ©2004. This Here Music. Reprinted with permission. ONE LICENSE #A-716826. All rights reserved.*

Sharing of the Peace: Sharing Jesus’ invitation to his disciples:

Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you!

— Resources from the *Book of Common Worship and Glory to God Hymnal*, PCUSA

Interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46

It is customary to interpret this passage in universal terms: at the last judgment all will be judged on the basis of how they have treated the needy and distressed. While this interpretation provides a very needed corrective by placing such a high priority on service to the poor and distraught, it involves several problems that must be acknowledged. First, there is nothing specifically Christian about the passage so interpreted. Even the ancient Egyptians believed that such good deeds would win them life after death. Faith plays no role.

Second, this view ignores the fact that the preceding chapters suggest other grounds for judgment. Jews will be judged on the basis of their rejection of the Messiah ([Matthew 23:29-39](#)). Christians will be evaluated regarding their faithfulness to Christ, their performance of assigned tasks ([Matthew 24:45-51](#); [Matthew 25:14-30](#)), and their avoidance of bad behavior, as well as on the basis of their good deeds ([Matthew 25:1-13](#)). Matthew certainly does not wish to suggest that Christians have no other obligation than to help the needy.

Third, while the phrase “all the nations” could theoretically mean “everyone,” this is most improbable. Matthew undoubtedly means “Gentiles”. If “all the Gentiles” excludes Jews, it must also exclude Jewish Christians and therefore Christians in general, who will be judged according to the criteria established by the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus. “All the Gentiles” thus refers to pagans who are neither Jewish proselytes nor converts to Christianity.

Jesus identifies with folks for numerous reasons. One of his particular concerns is with the vulnerable. For instance, he is quoted (Matthew 18:5) as sharing: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” It is not because of a faith relationship but because of their vulnerability (and equally their openness). Therefore, it is probable that Matthew intends “brothers” (or as in the NRSV “members of my family”) to be taken in a much broader sense than is usual in his Gospel: the poor and the distressed, whoever they may be, should be regarded as Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

There is nothing uniquely Christian about the idea of Jesus’ solidarity with his messengers; it reflects the Jewish shaliach principle: “A person’s representative is as the person themselves.” What is distinctive about Matthew 18.5 is the notion that vulnerable children who have no

conscious relationship to Jesus are nonetheless his “representatives”. In Matthew 25:31-46 this remarkable principle is extended to include all the world’s powerless and needy.

Because of this solidarity principle, the good deeds performed by pagans are not treated as atoning for their sins, not as evidence that they imitate God, but as indicating a relationship with Jesus! Although they knew it not, the righteous pagans were serving him by helping those with whom he identified. Although their case is anomalous, they are in a limited sense, “in Christ” by means of this service. They are “anonymous Christians.”

If you are disappointed that the usual interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 has been abandoned, you need only remember that no less is expected of Jesus’ confessing followers than of “the righteous pagans.”

— from *Matthew, A Bible Commentary For Teaching and Preaching*, Douglas R.A. Hare

Meditation on Matthew 25:31-46

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! Blessings in God’s name on this 25th Sunday after Pentecost, or the 34th day in Ordinary Time. We have come to the end of the church year. A new year begins with the first Sunday of Advent next week, a four-week time of preparation, of ad-venture, leading up to another anniversary of Christmas, of Christ’s Mass, the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

We have been reading through the five teaching sections of Matthew over the past month of Sundays and today we conclude our study with the second half of Matthew 25, sometimes called the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. This story is important for several reasons, including how for us it is the Biblical template for our choice to be a Matthew 25 Church. The Matthew 25 movement within the Presbyterian Church (USA) is an initiative inviting Presbyterians to actively engage in the world around them so that “our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities.” How do we receive this story that is often experienced as either/or—judgmental in teaching?

Matthew 25:31-34 is the story in the fifth teaching section of Matthew, the concluding story of stories that are often described as judgment stories. And it is hard to argue with that description. If that is all they are understood as, however, we run the risk of misunderstanding both Jesus’ words to his disciples and Jesus’ words to the disciples in Matthew’s church and every other church since.

Jesus has been teaching his disciples in Jerusalem during the last week of his life. “When the Son of Man comes in all his glory” is the way this teaching begins. Within the history of Israel, the term “Son of Man” had shifted from being a term used for all the people to a term used for a specific person.

Second, note how the individual featured in the story becomes “the king,” and then “Lord.” Is this the same person, a different person? Is the Son of Man observing what is going on or the actor in what is going on?

Third, those who gather around the Son of Man/king are “all the nations,” code for gentiles in this Gospel.

Fourth, the benefit of being at “the right hand” is highlighted in this parable, as is the assumption that sheep (somehow) are more valuable than goats. There is much going on. Including confusion in both camps.

The sheep who have gathered at the right hand hear the following: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” These individuals (sheep?) are rewarded for assisting the Son of Man/king/Lord when the latter was found hungry/thirsty/naked/sick/in prison. They wonder when this happened, for they have no memory. The response is “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The voice then turns to the left hand, to the goats, and declares: “You that are accursed depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” for these persons did not respond to similar needs when presented. They too are confused for they don’t remember seeing and not responding to the needs of the Son of Man/king/Lord. The speaker responds: “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.” Those that did are blessed. Those that did not are cursed. Judgment.

In asking persons to read and reflect on this text, the common response is that the story is pretty judgmental, that it is an either/or rather than a both/and story, and it does not sit well with folks. Because it is Jesus telling the story, I believe it is well for us to understand it to be a story about God, even if we do not like it. What is being said to hear?

The context in Matthew is Jesus speaking with his disciples during the last week of his life. The context for Matthew is communicating to disciples of Jesus who are wondering when Jesus will return. The reading for us comes on the last Sunday of the church year, the text inviting us to both look back and to look forward. We are on the cusp of Advent, a four-week season of preparation for the advent-ure that is Jesus, beginning with his birth and a reprise of his life leading up to and away from Easter. Advent is a season of preparation, not simply for Christmas, but for life as a disciple of Jesus. How does this text help us understand what God expects/understands of us as disciples of Jesus Christ?

With respect to judgment, how does our appreciation of God change if we hear and seek to understand the text in this way? If it is true that God is judgmental, how do we feel, what do we think about that reality? This is a story that is only told in Matthew. Do we wish that it had never been included here? Do we wish Matthew, or any of the thousands of scribes who handwrote the Gospel after its composition had simply edited it out? Why does the idea of judgment and God sit so uneasily with us? Is it because we believe that it contrasts—even conflicts—with an understanding of God as love?

If you will allow, one more question: what if we were to hear the text as invitational as well as judgmental? I am not suggesting that we replace judgmental with invitational, because that would transfer understanding into a different either/or categorization, which is not what I believe

God wants us to embrace as disciples. God does not desire us to be robotic, but reflective in our discipleship. Instead, I wonder if it is useful for us to return it to a both/and context by hearing it as invitational as well as judgmental. In the case of the story, the outcome is shared: persons are blessed or condemned. And we live on the front side of the end of the story, therefore we still can live and love in a way that puts us with the sheep, not with the goats. As Jesus is fond of saying, “those who have ears to hear...”.

If there is a judgment, which can also be translated as since there is a judgment, we have a heads’ up on what the question will be, at least in terms of Matthew’s understanding in sharing this story. God, in the person of Jesus, through the passion and purpose of the Holy Spirit—whether as the Son of Man or king or Lord—desires that we love our neighbor, and our neighbor here is presented as *anyone* who is in need of basics, of necessities, is no more or less than the neighbor that is personified in the story we know as the Good Samaritan. This story invites us to see those who are in need—anyone and everyone, and not to offer them pity, but to offer them God’s love in the form of food, drink, clothing, care, visitation. God is paying attention. We are being invited to do likewise and to respond.

Amen.