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The Final Exam

I led the funeral service of a good man, Denny Richardson last year. By profession he was a professor of Social Work. In his free time he helped in the homeless ministry at Broadway Baptist Church. Every summer he went on a mission trip to the Navajo Reservation to help Navajo people in a variety of ways. I called him a “Matthew 25 Christian”, because his following of Jesus was centered in caring for “the least of these”.

There are churches that are “Matthew 25 Churches”. Grace Baptist is one.

I

A New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz who has studied the interpretation of this text through the centuries writes that it is “a paradigmatic, basic text for an undogmatic and practical Christianity.” That is, it offers us a *Christianity less centered on having the right doctrine or theology, and more centered on love*, especially love shown to the “least of these.”

It is where Paul put his emphasis in his famous “love chapter”, I Corinthians 13:

“Though I speak in the tongues of humans and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all

mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (I Cor. 13:1-3)

II

This story is part parable and part apocalyptic drama, that is to say, it is to be taken seriously but not literally. As a parable it has one point: at the heart of following Jesus is caring for the least of these. As an apocalyptic drama (apocalypse means *unveiling* or *revelation*), it unveils the future so that we may live differently today. You get the Final Exam now!

III

It is universal in scope, as most apocalyptic dramas are. Who are “all the nations, all the peoples (*panta ethne*) who are brought before the throne? Not “all Christians” as some interpret the phrase, but all nations and peoples. And not just individuals, but nations and people groups too. Nations are judged by how they treat the most vulnerable in their midst.

And who are “the least of these my brothers and sisters”? The NRSV reads “who are members of my family.” But the least of these are not just those in need in the church, but those in need anywhere and everywhere.

Wendell Berry says that the most revolutionary concept in the gospels centers in the word “neighbor”. Not the neighbor we would choose, but the one we have. “Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asked, hoping for an easy answer. And Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to say the neighbor is anyone in need. The real question, he said, is “Am I acting like a neighbor?”

IV

It is Jesus himself we meet when we care for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a story entitled, “Where Love Is, There God Is Also”. It’s the story of a cobbler, a shoemaker (no relation) named Martyn who is mourning the death of his son. He hears the voice of Christ telling him he will come to him the next day. He spends the next day waiting and watching at his window. Various people come by.

First, there is an old man bone weary from shoveling snow. Then comes the wife of a soldier with a small child, both freezing. Then comes an old woman who has been arguing with a poor street urchin over a stolen apple.

Martyn invites them all in to warm up and rest. And he offers them food and drink. These three people were Christ, but Martyn doesn’t know it. Later he reads the words from Matthew, “In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these you have done

it to me.” Now he understands. Christ *did* come to him. For Tolstoy the heart of the Christian message is I John 4:7-8.

Beloved let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Another way to say it is: *Christ waits for us in the least of these.*

St. Francis’ life was changed one day while riding near Assisi. He saw a leper and was repulsed by the sight. He stopped, kissed the leper’s hand, then his lips and discovered as he did, he was kissing Christ.

Later he heard Christ say, “Repair my church”. He founded a movement of voluntary poverty to care for the poor. They became known as Franciscans. The church is still being repaired and renewed by their witness.

V

There is a good surprise and a not so good surprise in this story. The son of Man separated those gathered before the throne as a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, sheep on the right, goats on the left.

To those on the right hand he said, “Come you 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was a prisoner and you came to me”.

And they, shocked, said “When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and in prison?”

Then the clincher: “In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brother and sisters, you have done it to me.”

Then the king called the goats, the ones on his left and said, “You are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire. For I was hungry and you did not feed me, thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and you did not come to care, in prison and you did not visit me.”

And they, shocked as well, said “When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and in prison and not care for you.”? He answered, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did it not to me.”

As Jesus said elsewhere in the gospels: “It is not those who call me ‘Lord, Lord’ who shall enter the kingdom of heaven but those who do the will of my Father.”

There were those on the right surprised they are *in* and those on the left surprised they are *not*.

I believe—I of course may be wrong—that there are countless millions who do not confess Jesus as Lord but who have *lived* as though Jesus is Lord who will be invited into the kingdom of heaven. They have lived by love, and God abides in them.

There was an old Peace Corps commercial that said, after showing Peace Corps volunteers helping people around the world: “The Peace Corps”: A way to say “I love you” without getting caught.

There are a lot of people who want to be a Christian without getting caught! Who love the way of Christ and the way of love even though they are not members of a church. The kingdom of God is broader than institutional Christianity.

VI

Let me return to the question: *Who are the least of these?* They may not strictly fit into the categories of the story: the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and in prison. They may be people looked down upon, shunned and shamed, lonely and alone, cast aside, forgotten. They may be people hungry for love, thirsty for forgiveness, different, suffering mental illness, a prisoner to addiction. The least of these maybe somebody least *in your eyes*, someone you don't like. God may be calling you to love someone you don't like very much.

For Will Campbell, a liberal Southern pastor who was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, the least of these were Ku Klux Klanners. He befriended them and ministered to them.

VII

The next observation is about *how* the church goes about caring for the least of these.

1) First, there is the way of private benevolence and care giving. In as much as it involves friendship, all the better. Transformation happens in relationship. We're talking about one's personal mission here.

2) Secondly is the way of congregational mission as the church engages the lives of the least of these. Again, the more relationship the better.

3) The third way involves efforts to change public policy through democratic action to help the poor. Christians have a responsibility to shape policies that help or at least do not hurt the hungry, thirsty, immigrant, naked, sick and imprisoned.

We are not all called equally to all three ways. One way is not superior nor inferior to the other ways. So we honor each other in the church for the particular ways they care for the least of these. The Moravians have a great motto for the church: "In essential things, unity; in unessential things, diversity; in all things, charity."

The essential issue is *calling*: What is God calling you to do? We do not all have the same gifts and same call. The church honors the diversity of gifts.

Calling, as Frederick Buechner says, comes at the meeting place of your great joy, or hunger, on the one hand and the world's great need on the other. Where is that meeting place for you? You may find that meeting place in your work, your profession, or in and through the church. Or in your personal mission. What makes you alive? Brings you joy? Answers your hunger? These questions are important in the discerning of your calling.

We cannot rid the world of hunger, thirst, hatred of the stranger, sicknesses and prisons, but we can do *something* that makes a difference. I love the words of Mother Teresa who gave her life for the poor of Calcutta. "Do small things with great love." The parable asks: What are you going to do with the rest of your life... *that matters*?

VIII

Lastly, what about the final Judgment? The images in the story may give us the willies.

I take comfort in the story of the monk who prayed every day in front of a painting of the Last Judgment, a dark and fearsome picture of heaven and hell. Every day he left his time of prayer with a happy, peaceful spirit. A friend asked him, "How can you pray in front of that picture and come away happy?"

The monk replied: *Because the one who comes to judge is the one who died for me.*

It is *Christ* who is the Judge, the one who loved us and gave himself for us, us and the whole world. Who loved sinners and befriended outcasts and who said over and over to those who needed it most: “Go in peace; your sins are forgiven”. And it is he who will say, “Come you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”