

Sheep and Goats

November 26, 2023

Matthew 25:31-46

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

It never fails I am always surprised at how quickly Advent and Christmas come around each year.

But here we are, on the last Sunday of the year.

The last Sunday of the Christian Year, that is.

I love the Christian calendar. I love the way we anticipate the coming of Jesus in Advent and celebrate the birth for twelve full days during Christmas. I love the way we greet Jesus' light that shines into the world in Epiphany and gets brighter and brighter in the weeks that follow. //I can't say that I love walking beside Jesus on his journey to the cross during Lent, but I know I need to do it, it deepens my celebration of Easter and those fifty days' worth of alleluias that follow. And then, of course, comes Pentecost, and all the Sundays after that, Sundays in which we get to be disciples, following Jesus, hearing him preach and teach, watching him help and heal, becoming more convinced that the way of love is more powerful than the ways of indifference. And then we come to this Sunday, a Sunday for affirming that Jesus Way, is the way for us. Ancient words and imagery claim this day as Christ the King Sunday or Reign of Christ Sunday.

In Matthew's Gospel we are given an interesting vision of the Reign of Christ or the place of Jesus, in God's world. Jesus has been fending off the scribes and Pharisees for several chapters: answering their questions, calling their bluff, and warning them and his disciples of the devastation that is about to come on all the earth. In this passage Matthew shifts our gaze to the time just after the End, when the smoke has cleared, and all the nations of the world are standing there blinking in the bright sunshine of eternity. **For Matthew** this is when the Son will come in all his glory and everybody will fall into the long line leading up to the throne and the judgment will begin. For one wonderful, or terrifying moment, each person will look into the eyes of the King, and with a nod of his head, he will direct them to one side of the throne or the other. And then, when the judgment is over, he will pronounce the verdict. You know how it goes: to those on his right—the sheep—he will say, "Come, you that are blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," but to those on his left—the goats—he will say, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire." Heavy stuff. The Gospel writer Matthew has quite the imagination – it is an amazing story. And within this story there is truth and I think the key to the truth is found in those goats and sheep.///

The difference between the sheep and the goats, it seems to me is that the sheep looked on the suffering of the world and had compassion and the goats did not. It is interesting that in both cases the sheep and the goats are surprised by the verdict.

"When did we see you in need and help you?" the sheep ask.

"When did we see you and not help?" the goats ask.

And in their question the importance of the word *seeing* emerges.

“I was there,” Jesus says. “I was in every hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned person you ever encountered. You just didn’t see me.” You can almost hear their response. “But Lord, if we’d known it was you – we would have acted differently. We would have thrown a party, **would have baked a cake**. We would have treated you like the king you are!” Which is just what Jesus doesn’t want. He doesn’t want people to treat him differently than they treat everybody else. He wants them to treat everybody else as they would treat him. And so, the one we would follow, the one at the centre of our living, has come to us, disguised as those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, and imprisoned. He has identified with these ones so closely that the way we treat these is the way we treat him, and what he is watching for? Whether or not, we will see the need before us and respond with compassion.

Friends, compassion doesn’t often happen without *seeing*. I think those of our church who serve meals on wheel, who once help with supper service at the Lighthouse, who once prepare meals with the folks of the Integrated Community Ministries. I think those of our church who take our refugee family to appointments and have them over for supper – see things. Those who fill a sock, or drop a few dollars in the kettles in the mall or who take a moment to pray of those in need – see things. Those of us who watch the news and read of nations and peoples on the edge, and are consequently moved by the pain of it all - see things.

Seeing is believing. It changes things. It moves it from our head to our heart. Do you remember what God said to Moses from the burning bush? “I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.” God sees, God hears, God knows, and then God does. But it begins with seeing. It always seems to begin with seeing.

“When did we see you and do something for you?” the sheep ask. They ask three times, and in each case Jesus responds by saying, “Whenever you saw the suffering of the least of these my brothers and sisters and did something about it, you did it to me.”

“When did we see you and not do anything for you?” the goats ask. “Whenever you failed to see their suffering and do something about it,” he answers, “you failed to do it to me.” ///

Rev. Jim Somerville writes about a class experience he had while at seminary. Rev. Somerville writes: While I was there, I participated in a class exercise called “The Plunge.” As a way to experience the plight of the poor firsthand my professor challenged us to spend 24 hours on the streets of the city. We were each assigned a partner—I got Roger—and we were told that we could bring 65 cents apiece: just enough for bus fare to get us downtown. Before we went on the Plunge, Roger and I spent four or five days getting ready, which meant that we didn’t shower or shave or change clothes in all that time. By Friday afternoon we looked the part. We saved 65 cents apiece by catching a ride downtown with a guy in a blue van who laughed when he heard what we were up to. So, there we were, on the streets, ragged, unshaven, and smelly. That’s how the adventure began. For the first few hours it felt like an adventure. I put a bottle cap in one shoe, forcing me to walk with a limp, thinking that would make me look more authentic. We panhandled outside the fancy theater downtown and one of my seminary professors walked right by me, without so much as a

glance. We ended up in the Salvation Army shelter just before midnight with twenty other men who lay there stinking and belching and snoring. It was a long night. The next morning, we got up and out of that place as quickly as we could and spent the rest of the day wandering the streets.

It was sometime that morning that I noticed people weren't looking at me. I was sitting on a bench outside a big department store, enjoying the sunshine, when a mother and her daughter came walking toward me. I smiled and said hello but the mother looked right through me as if I had become invisible. And once I noticed it in her, I noticed that everyone was doing it. They were looking around me, or past me, or through me, but they weren't looking at me. If they had looked at me, they might have seen me, and if they had seen me, they might have had to acknowledge my presence, and if they acknowledged my presence then they might have had to do something for me. It was so much easier just to pretend they didn't see, just to look around, or past, or through. Just to walk briskly by with their heads held high while I disappeared a little piece at a time.

At noon that day Roger and I went to the Cathedral of the Assumption on Fifth Street because we heard they gave out sandwiches after mass. I sat on a back pew, listening to the young priest deliver a very earnest sermon from Luke 15. There were the scribes and Pharisees, complaining about Jesus because he welcomed sinners and tax collectors and ate with them. "Jesus kept bad company," the priest said.... Here at the Cathedral of the Assumption we're trying to do what Jesus would do. We're trying to welcome those he would welcome. Some of our parishioners don't like it very much. They wish we would turn some people away. But if Jesus wouldn't turn them away then neither can we." When the mass was over he walked back to where I was sitting. "What's your name?" he asked. "Jim," I said. He said, "Good to meet you, Jim," and stuck out his hand to shake mine. It was the first time in 24 hours that anyone had offered to touch me and I felt a lump rise in my throat, making it hard to ask the question that had been on my mind since I walked in the place. "Do you give away any food?" This priest looked, he saw, he felt compassion. ///

I believe God wants us to see the other, to truly see and in love, respond, just as Jesus would.

According to the gospel writer Matthew - to **see with such compassion** is the difference between heaven and hell.

Most of us probably do good things because we are genuinely good people. But, I am haunted by this parable, and I will always be haunted by it. I'm not haunted so much by the idea of the "everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" as I am by the idea that the homeless person I just walked by on the street downtown, the poorly dressed woman with bruises on her face and tangled hair, the young man talking to himself in the door way of the drug store, was Christ himself. And I didn't even look.

God have mercy. Amen

Rev. Debra Berg