

“Jesus is Everywhere”

Matthew 25: 31-46

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost/A, November 20, 2011

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We've come to the end of another perfectly good church year. I realize there are still six weeks left in the calendar year. However for the liturgically minded church, this is technically New Year's Eve. On New Year's Eve we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Most progressive Christians know little about Christ the king. In fact, hearing Christ and king in the same sentence makes us a bit nervous. Presumably the lessons we hear today teach us what it is like to live in the kin-dom of God. How would you describe the kin-dom of God? How do we know if this is the kin-dom? In this parable of the goats and the sheep, Jesus takes one last opportunity to impress upon his disciples the difference between kin-dom living and kingdom living. There is an intentional and subtle difference.

This story of the goats and the sheep is probably one of the most familiar and likely the most feared. This teachable moment in Matthew's gospel takes place at the end of Jesus' ministry. This is the last and final opportunity for the disciples to get what Jesus is saying. In true fashion, Jesus does not sugar coat the parable. Matthew makes it perfectly clear, much clearer than we want to hear or acknowledge. I imagine your feelings about this parable hinge on whether or not you consider yourself a goat or a sheep. In the end, God will decide whether we are goats or sheep. However, at judgment time, I imagine most of us would rather be sheep. The decision is not entirely arbitrary. Those who have met the needs of the poor, who have fed the hungry and clothed the naked and visited the ones who are lonely, are in pretty good shape, but you can never be sure.

What we do matters. What we don't do matters just as much. That is what Jesus is saying. We will be judged. However such judgment rests with God. It is not up to other Christians to decide whether or not we meet the criteria for faithful discipleship. It is not up to the minister to decide who did enough and whether or not our actions match our deepest intentions. God knows and God will make the final determination. There will be a final exam and only God knows what will be on it. Talk about anxiety!

On this last Sunday in the liturgical year we hear about Christ the king, Christ the judge, who knows everything we have ever done. For most of us, this image of Jesus as king or judge is uncomfortable. We are okay with Jesus the baby or physician or teacher or friend. We especially like Jesus the prophet or justice seeker. Jesus the judge makes us a bit nervous. I am reminded of a sign above the cash register at the Washington Cathedral that reads “we may not have seen you take it, but God did.” God sees. God knows. According to the Gospel what God does with that knowledge on the last day is to separate us into two groups—goats on the left and sheep on the right, goats into eternal punishment and sheep into eternal life, depending on how we have behaved during our lifetimes.

The point Matthew makes, as he has before in his Gospel, is that one's relationship with God is not about *having* faith but of *doing* faith, and that those who do not will be fed like so much trash into the fire that never goes out. I find Matthew a bit annoying. He makes it sound so clear. I don't experience life as black and white. I live most of my days trying to distinguish between the subtle shades of grey. Matthew frustrates us when he makes it seem so easy. You either fed the hungry or clothed the naked or visited the one in prison or you didn't. If I have failed to do these things consistently, do I become a goat? Neither the goats nor the sheep think Jesus is talking about them. They both wonder, "When did *we* do these things?" The goats did nothing and start to panic. The sheep did what was right and are oblivious to why anyone would care.

So often we are confronted by someone in need and wonder how to respond. Do I give money to the homeless vet on the street corner holding up the sign? Do I fill the gas tank of the person who needs to get to a doctor's appointment and has only a few dollars left in his pocket? Do I feel guilty when I say "no" if the cashier asks "would you like to donate some money today to x y or z?" We make it seem so complicated when Matthew makes it sound so easy. We overanalyze each request or worry about our response because our intention is not helping the one in need but perhaps getting God's attention. See me, God? I always do the right thing? Have I earned my way into heaven yet? Jesus is not talking about racking up brownie points. He is reminding his disciples that their primary responsibility is to create communities that care for everyone, where everyone's needs are met.

What we do matters. What we do not do matters too. We are not however, doomed by one misdeed or one inaction. God will judge us on how we lived our life, as a whole, not on each individual response. Matthew does not present us with a checklist for kin-dom living; fed the hungry, check, visited the prisoner, check. We are all human. There are days when we are exceedingly gracious, generous, and compassionate and days when we walk away from the one in need without responding. The Good News is that each new day brings with it the opportunity to act differently. Each interaction with another human being is an opportunity to broaden our sense of kinship or to diminish it. Our calling is not only to alleviate the suffering of others, but to be in relationship with the least of these so that together we become the body of Christ.

The writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor reflecting on this story says, "for sheep and goats alike, the surprise is that Jesus is not *somewhere*—he is *everywhere*—and especially with the least important people who populate our days, whoever they may be. God sees, God knows, and God will judge us according to how we behaved when we thought God was not around."

What if that is true, that Jesus is present in every single person whose path crosses ours, particularly in the least ones, the lost ones, and the ones we would never have expected. What do we do knowing that everyone we meet is Jesus asking for something to eat or drink, for some attention, asking us to speak where he can not or stand up to injustice when she can not? We do what we can wherever we can. We invite others to join us.

We open our souls to receive the word that may convict us or judge us or absolve us perhaps all at the same time. Jesus tells this story not simply to scare his disciples into doing the right thing but to help them understand that being in community, knowing each other at a deeply spiritual level is as important as feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. He invites us to not merely do what is right, but to take it one step further, to look into the eyes of the one others call the least and to see Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to say, “that seems to be one thing the sheep know how to do that the goats have never tried: *to look, to see, to seek* Christ in the last, the lost, the least. I am sure Matthew would not agree with me, but if you ask me, that is enough to start with. The food, the drink, the welcome, and the visit—all those things will follow in their own good time. They are necessary for life, they are not optional, but by themselves they are just quarters in a cup. Charity is no substitute for kinship. We are not called to be philanthropists or social workers, but brothers and sisters. We are called into relationship, even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary or sad. We are called to look at each other and see Christ, who promises to be there where our eyes meet, and in that glance to teach us something we need to know.”

We are part of the kin-dom of God, the body of Christ. The sheep and the goats both answered, “When was it that *we* saw you?” reminding me that we are part of a community and sometimes we are called to do together those things I can not do alone. I am not responsible for feeding every hungry person or clothing everyone who is needy or visiting every person who is alone. God calls us to do our part, to use our gifts to respond to those who are in need, together. As we respond, we form bonds of love, we widen and broaden the kin-dom and miraculously it becomes something beyond which any of us could imagine. More than 500 years ago, St. Teresa of Avila wrote this prayer. She understood that as Christians Christ calls us to move beyond doing to being, from living by a list of expectations to creating communities where everyone is welcome, where we look into each other’s eyes and see the face of Christ. When we are able to make this transition, the kin-dom of God will be near. I invite you to go from here, empowered by St. Theresa’s timeless blessing, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now.” For all those who aspire to be sheep, may it be so! Amen

Source:

Barbara Brown Taylor, “Knowing Glances,” *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1993.