

Lead Us To You
The Rev. George Ragsdale
Christ the King Sunday, November 20, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46

When I was serving churches in England, I attended a conference at Bath Abbey, in Somerset. Covering the front of the main entrance to the abbey is an incredible sculpture of angels and archangels, ascending and descending the stairs to heaven. Over the doorway, and high above a massive stained glass window there is a sculpture of Jesus, sitting on his throne in judgment. He is at the center of this massive tapestry in stone, angels all around. In one hand, he holds the earth, almost like a grocer inspecting fruit for blemishes. Can you imagine being reminded of that every time you walked into church? Judgment. All nations, gathered together and then separated. There's something terrible, terrifying about it. I wanted to walk right in and get down on my knees and pray, "Lord, have mercy on me."

Maybe that's the way we hear this passage from Matthew, too? It's like what Mark Twain once said, "It's not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me. It's what I *do* understand." Jesus tells us the Son of Man will come in glory to sit in judgment over all the earth. It will be like sheep and goats milling about together and then being separated from one another. What is it that separates sheep from goats? What is it that makes one different from the other? According to Jesus, it's the way they have treated the hungry and thirsty, the naked and sick, the stranger and the prisoner.

It's interesting though, when the king speaks about how they've treated those who are hungry and naked and in prison – it's personal. "I was hungry and you gave me food." "I was in prison and you visited me." "I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink." "I was naked and you did not give me any clothing." "Truly I tell you," the King

says, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The amazing thing is that when the king says this, the sheep and the goats, they all look around dumbfounded. “Lord, when did we see you?” No one knows. No one sees. It’s hard to see the king. It’s hard to see Jesus. That’s probably the question we get as pastors more than anything else. “I’m trying to believe, trying to love God, trying to be in relationship with God. It’s just that I don’t know where God is in my life. I don’t see God. I don’t feel God moving. I don’t sense God at work.” So often we are like those sheep and goats, crying out, “Where were you, where *are* you Lord?”

Sam Wells, the Dean of Duke Chapel, has rather kindly observed that we are actually in good company. Those who saw Jesus in his *earthly* life had trouble actually *seeing* him. He was naked, thirsty, hanging there on the cross, and even his disciples abandoned him. Jesus, the King of the Universe, naked and abandoned, suffering on the cross? It’s hard to see Jesus. We long to see him, to know him. Maybe we cry out like those sheep and goats, “Lord, where were you?” And the answer we are given is astonishing in its simplicity, profound in its mystery. Jesus, Christ the King, answers “I was there, I am there, in the dark places, with the suffering people, wherever there is hunger, thirst, loneliness, vulnerability, desperation, abandonment. I am there, in the suffering people and places of the world.”

It’s astonishing, it sounds so simple. Yet, it is one of the great mysteries of faith in this life. Even the sheep, the righteous, the ones who did feed, clothe, visit, and comfort those in need – even they had trouble recognizing the Lord in their midst.

Seeing Jesus wasn’t their motivation. They were just doing what Jesus told them to do in the first place. What was it Jesus told the Pharisee’s lawyer? It’s just a few chapters back in Matthew’s Gospel. ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your

soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Sheep are sheep not because they went out to look for Jesus in the hungry and hurting, but because they did what Jesus told them to do and loved their neighbors as themselves. Goats are goats not because they failed to see Jesus, but because they failed to do anything at all.

The question isn’t “Did you see Jesus and serve him?” The question is, “Did you serve?” A colleague of mine who serves in another part of our state was telling me how hard it is for him when folks come to see him for help and assistance. “You know, George,” he said, “sometimes I look at the people who come in and I have no problem seeing Jesus. Sometimes it’s easy. Other times, it’s harder. That’s when I feel like I’m really being tested – not to see Jesus, but to see whoever it is standing there with me.”

So maybe the question isn’t, “Did you see Jesus and serve him?” but “Did you see Tom? Did you see James? Did you see Mary? Did you see Mark? Did you see them and serve them?”

Former President Jimmy Carter tells the story of a men’s Sunday School class at his home church back in Georgia. Every year around the holidays, the class would feel a little generous and decide they needed to do something good for somebody else. One year, right around Thanksgiving, someone suggested they adopt a family in need and give them a good Thanksgiving dinner. They decided who would do what, how it would happen and then they hit on a problem. Someone spoke up and asked, “Does anyone know a family in need?” And they looked around at each other and realized that for all their good intentions, none of them actually knew anyone personally who’d benefit from their generosity.

One of the dangers in this story is hearing it as a call to *do good*. Really, I think it's a reminder to live as Christ lived. It's a call to a way of living – connected, in relationship with one another. Think about those words Jesus says in the reading today. It's not, "Those who ended world hunger, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." He says, "I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. I was naked, you clothed me."

I think about these bags of food we are collecting this morning. It's incredible, amazing to see all these bags. I think about them, that each of them will go to a person, a family – someone with a name, a story, a need, a need that probably goes well beyond physical hunger, the same kind of need at the heart of every human life – the deep desire for love, acceptance, goodness, kindness and mercy.

We have these groups in our church called "Hope Teams." Put very simply, these teams come together to befriend and love and support families who have been homeless in our city. I was talking with someone involved with one of those teams recently, and she was telling me how she hears people talking about people who are homeless in our city. In some ways, we all do this, I think – we speak in broad generalizations, talk about "the homeless," and then employ these sweeping statements that we assume would solve things.

Anyway, she was saying she was listening one day to that kind of conversation and began to think, "You know, they're talking about my friend." And she said, "With my friend, it's just more complicated than we ever make it sound. I listen to her talk about her life and it's like, no one has believed in her for a long time." I asked her what was the hardest part about being on that team. She thought and said, "It's just learning kindness, patience, and mercy in ways I never knew before."

Now, she didn't say it, but as she talked I began to think about our world, how we've got all these groups and agendas – the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street – and maybe what we all need, what we all desire

deep down, what we are all called to do is learn a kind of kindness, patience and mercy that we have never known before.

One of the great hymns of the early church puts it beautifully, “Where charity, where love is found, God is there.” We long to see Jesus, to know God at work in our midst. Jesus says to us, “You want to know where I am. I’m in the suffering places, alongside the people in the world who are at the bottom, at their wit’s end.” In suffering, in coming alongside one another with love and kindness, mercy and patience, God is there. Isn’t that what church looks like at its best? Isn’t that what we are called to be, a people who will go and stand alongside those who are hurting, hungry, suffering – and love?

I was preparing for this sermon today and ran across an alternate way of reading this parable that’s had me fascinated all week. It is possible, based on a study of the words Jesus uses in this passage and the words in the rest of Matthew’s Gospel, to suppose that when Jesus speaks of “the least of these,” he’s actually referring to the church. Thus, the criteria for judgment would be how the world treats his followers, how the world treats the church.

That sounds good, doesn’t it? In a world where the church is the butt of many jokes and attacks, we’re maybe tempted to stand a little taller, say “Yeah. The world will be judged based on how it treats us.” We’re maybe liking this alternative reading. And then we realize how it is Jesus describes us. “The least of these.” Not those who are at the top of the economic ladder, but those who hunger, thirst. Not those who have life together, all figured out, ready to save the world, but those who are numbered among the sick, the lonely, and those in prison. Not those who have God figured out, ready to take him to those who need him, but those who have realized he’s already there, and choose to go and be there, too.

As I’ve been writing this sermon this week, I’ve had my blue bag of food in the kitchen, ready to bring forward this Sunday. I’ll confess

to you what I think may be the biggest danger in our bringing these bags of food on a Sunday when we've heard these words from Matthew 25. The danger is that we'll hear Jesus' words, bring our food, and say "Check, got that done. I'm all set. Put me in the sheep column."

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We bring these bags and I hear Christ on the throne saying to us, "Well done, Myers Park! What an incredible beginning!" And maybe we come like those pilgrims to Bath Abbey: humbly, seeking mercy, saying "Lord, we are here for you. We've brought this food for you, and for all the people we know by name – our friends – who are hungry today. We're hungry too, Lord. We need your mercy, your grace, your love. We want to see you, to know you. Show us where you are. Lead us to these places – in our lives, in our church, in our neighborhoods, in our city, in our world where there is darkness, sorrow, suffering, need. Lord, lead us to the places where you've told us you are."

What incredible news, friends. The one who will sit in judgment (like a shepherd, Matthew says) is the one who is out there now, with you, with us – wherever there is need.

So we come on this day and we pray, "Lord, lead us. Lead us, Lord, to you."