

Sermon November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalms 100 (UMH 821)

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 25:31-46 Common English Bible

“Now when the Son of Man comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.

“Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’
“Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ “Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. I was hungry and you didn’t give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn’t give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you didn’t welcome me. I was naked and you didn’t give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’ “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn’t do anything to help you?’ Then he will answer, ‘I assure you that when you haven’t done it for one of the least of these, you haven’t done it for me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.”

The reading today is the last parable that Jesus told; his last public teaching before he was betrayed and arrested.

There are several surprises in this parable. According to the parable, we will be judged on the basis of how we treat those people who are in desperate need. Many of us were taught something different. We were taught that what will save us is our profession of faith, the public statement that we believe in God, and in Jesus. We were told to pray a prayer that asked Jesus to come into our hearts as lord and savior. We were taught that we had to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. We were taught that to be acceptable to God, we had to be pure in some way that had nothing to do with people who were in sick or hungry or in prison. This passage says none of those things, only that we care for those in need.

The parable is surprising in the fact that it says that the very people who are the most difficult and inconvenient to love are Jesus. When we look into the eyes of someone who is hungry or homeless, poorly dressed, dirty, smelly, different from us, we see Jesus looking back at us. When we look into the eyes of a person we disagree with, someone who is in prison, or in rehab, we see Jesus looking back at us. If we care for these people, we are caring for Jesus. Perhaps this is what it means to believe in Jesus, to believe that the poor and oppressed are Jesus. Perhaps faith and compassion are the same thing. When someone comes to the church or stops you on the street and asks for money or food, that person is Jesus.

It is also surprising that the sheep and goats don't know what they had done or not done for Jesus. If the goats had known that it was Jesus, surely they would have treated him differently. But, Jesus doesn't want to be treated differently than we treat others; Jesus wants us to treat all people like we would treat him. Those who receive a reward are those who take care of people who are in desperate need for no other reason than they see a need and strive to fill it. That is who they are, they are not thinking about reward or punishment. Only God can know what is in our minds and hearts, so only God can judge us. The sheep and goats were not able to judge themselves accurately. We are not even capable of judging ourselves accurately. If we can't judge ourselves accurately, how can we possibly be capable of judging others? The passage does not say that we are supposed to judge if a person who is hungry or thirsty or a stranger is worthy of help. That is not our call. It is not up to us to judge. End of story.

I feel fortunate that in both in my career as a PT and now as a pastor, I have gotten to know people who I would not have ever met otherwise; people very different from me. I have had the opportunity to talk to people who are desperately poor, people who regularly make choices between their medications or shoes for the children, or between paying rent or buying food. I have listened to people who have made disastrous decisions, and have ended up in jail, or jobless, or homeless. I have listened to people who were injured in accidents, prescribed painkillers as part of their treatment and become addicted. I have known women who had their first child at age 16, and so did their mother and grandmother. I have known people who at age 35 have already lost their teeth, who never had dental care, and I realized that their teenage daughter, who was the same age as my daughter at the time, was well on her way to losing her teeth also. I have sat with people whose grip on reality has faltered, and their experience of the world is not the same as mine. I have listened to people in physical and emotional and spiritual pain, and realized that there is no separation between physical, emotional and spiritual pain.

What I have found is that when I get to know these people, I am blessed. I have learned things from these people. I have learned about love and loyalty and what it takes to survive. I have learned about being thankful. Some of the most desperately poor people, people who didn't have electricity or running water, would spend a dollar at the dollar store just to bring me a gift at Christmas. They are kind and compassionate, and generous. I have found that what they need most, even when hungry and homeless and sick and in pain, is for someone to look them in the eye and see them as a child of God. They need to know that they are not invisible, and that someone cares, not in a general way, but about them as an individual. They need someone to hear their story, and to affirm their existence.

I am sure that those of you who have been to Haiti, or Honduras, or Redbird KY, or anywhere else on a mission trip have stories of people you met, who have little, but want to share what they have with you. People who are grateful for the little time you spend with them. But you don't have to go on a mission trip to meet people like this. They are all around us. We usually don't notice them, or we drive by them and don't stop. We don't engage them in conversation and look into their eyes.

The people listed in the scripture as hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison, and stranger, can save us from our selfishness, self-centeredness, and ego. They can open our eyes to the truth of what is important. They can crack open our hearts and help us forget ourselves and our petty problems for a while. They can certainly provide us with perspective.

But only if we get to know them. Only if we look into their eyes and see them as brothers and sisters in this world. Only if we spend time with them and listen to their stories.

It is wonderful to give money to feed the hungry, or for hurricane relief, or to build shelters for the homeless. It is wonderful and useful to vote for people who will support policies that provide for people who are hungry or homeless, or better yet, support policies that would change the underlying institutions that keep the poor from getting ahead while favoring the rich. Don't stop doing these things. But if that is all you do, **you** will never reap the benefit of getting to know someone in desperate need, and learning from them, and working alongside of them to create a better life for all of us. We can only build the Kingdom of God if we work together with the people that we call oppressed or marginalized or poor.

Are you a sheep or a goat? Don't worry about it. It will be a surprise in the end. Just go out and see people as people, all of them worthy of being treated with dignity and compassion. That just might save you from yourself.

Let us pray, gentle shepherd, king, creator, you know us better than we know ourselves. Take away our bent for judging. Give us eyes and hearts to see people that are in need, who are strangers, who are your children. Help us to listen to their stories, look into their eyes and treat them with the dignity and compassion that we would hope for if we were in their shoes. In other words, help us to build your kingdom. Amen