

Matthew 25:31-46 (The Inclusive Bible)

Leader: At the appointed time the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left. The ruler will say to those on the right,

RULER: ‘Come you blessed by God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.’

Right side (12th Street): ‘When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’

RULER: ‘The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me.’

Leader: Then the ruler will say to those on the left,

RULER: ‘Out of my sight, you accursed ones! Into that everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and the fallen angels! I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you gave me no welcome; naked and you gave me no clothing. I was ill and in prison and you did not come to visit me.’

Left side (piano): ‘When did we see you hungry or thirsty, or homeless or naked, or ill or in prison, and not take care of you?’

RULER: ‘The truth is, as often as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.’

Leader: They will go off to eternal punishment, and the just will go off to eternal life.

For Reflection:

“Mother Teresa always said, "Calcuttas are everywhere if only we have eyes to see. Find your Calcutta.”

— Shane Claiborne

I was in 7th grade I think, sitting around the campfire at Camp Calvin Crest, when I first heard the story of “The Shoemaker.”¹ My guess is that that single story has had more of an impact on me than any other - it has shaped, since that first hearing, my sense of who I am supposed to be as a follower of Jesus; of what God calls us to; it has shaped my moral imagination; it has impacted how I read scripture. That folktale of the Shoemaker, bringing to life this teaching of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew:

For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.

This teaching of Jesus, what is sometimes called “the parable of the sheep and the goats,” comes at the end of a long section of Jesus teaching the disciples. And this whole section of Jesus’ teaching is in response to a question the disciples have asked him: **“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”** (24:3).

The disciples want to know what to look for, how they will know they are in the last days, how they can be certain we’ve come to the end. And so Jesus tells them of the need to be watchful, to pay attention; he warns them that many will come and claim to be the Messiah and lead people astray; he says there will be signs of the end both on earth and in the heavens (24:4-35), AND at the same time, no one knows the day or the hour, neither the angels in heaven, not even him, but only God (24:36).

And then, Jesus concludes his teaching on how they will recognize they are in the final days with this teaching of the final judgment - not of *how* to know when the end will come, but what will happen in the end. The Gospel of Matthew places this image of people being separated to the right and left, at the close of the public ministry of Jesus. This is the last message of Jesus before we move into passion story, the last teaching before Judas’ betrayal, the last supper, Jesus’ arrest and execution. This very location makes me think that perhaps the

¹ During the Children’s Time, I told a version of the story “The Shoemaker”, a Russian folktale. If you’ve never heard it, for a version three minute version, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pifDZ1hu6gY>

author of Matthew wants to underscore it - that if he had had access to highlighter technology, he would have used it here. It is though he were saying, "If you forget the other things Jesus did and said, please remember his final message."

And what is his final message? This is how it shall be when life ceases. This is how it will be when history ends and every person is seen under the light of judgment. When the Promised One comes in the clouds of glory attended by angels, every person who ever lived will stand and be judged. And this will be the final judgment; the truth will be revealed. The truth that there is an eternity of difference in people.

And, in this final teaching of Jesus, according to what standard is that difference measured? In response to what question is the distinction made?

-Did you keep the law? Did you follow the ten commandments? According to this teaching, that is not the question.

-Did you tithe ten percent of your income? According to this teaching, that is not the question.

-Did you interpret scripture correctly?

-Did you have the correct stance on human sexuality?

-Did you read your daily devotional and go to church three Sundays a month? None of these are the questions.

Did you accept Jesus as your personal savior? In this final teaching of Jesus, even this is not the Question to be asked in the end.

The final question of judgment, according to this story, according to this final teaching of Jesus is a surprising one. It may not surprise you, but it does me. I am surprised by it because, growing up in the church, I was under the impression the final question to be asked would be a very different one; I am surprised because if you listen to much Christian teaching, the final question portrayed is a very different one; I am surprised because, if you

sit in on church meetings - whether they be a local congregation or a national church body - the questions we are spending the bulk of our time dealing with, are much different questions.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, when pastors gather together, we ask questions about numbers of people and years of service, but rarely do we ask each other much that has to do with this question from Matthew 25. When we, as religious bodies and institutions write confessions of faith and consider what membership means; when we consider who might lose their voting rights or ability to be a minister; when we discuss who might be allowed to sit at our particular religious table - the questions we ask often have little to do with Matthew 25. The statements of faith we are asked to sign and consider as ministers, the questions we are forced to write and reflect on for licensing and ordination, the statements we are asked to sign, they usually have little to do with the final question of judgment posed here on the mouth of Jesus.

It happens every few months, as I'm sure it does at many churches, that people email or call to find out about our church - they are new to town or looking for a new church, but there are so many to visit, so they want to know a bit more than is revealed on our website before coming to visit. And almost every time their questions revolve around what we believe about the Bible or our stance as it relates to people who are LGBTQ? When someone is looking for a church, not once in seven years have I received an email or call from someone saying, "before visiting, could you tell me - does your church feed the hungry? Do you welcome the stranger? Do you seek to clothe the naked? Do you visit those in prison? Do you comfort the ill and dying?"

Of course there are other, important things for followers of Jesus to be concerned with; there are other questions that institutions have to be concerned with. Perhaps we all just assume that every church is doing this; maybe we just all assume that every follower of Jesus believes in the important tasks of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those in prison. So, perhaps we just don't think these distinguish us, one way or the other. So instead we have focused on other questions, but taken this question for granted.

But according to Matthew 25, according to this final teaching of Jesus, in the end, there is the only question that matters.

Now, to be honest, this passage is also difficult for me for a few reasons:

- 1) I have difficulty with the judgment image at the end of this teaching. During my time here, I have in many ways, tried to deconstruct the image of a God who is primarily a God of judgment. I have said that our view of God as Judge is primarily a projection of our own guilt; I have tried to lift-up the God who is simply in love with you. And yet, the portrayal here is again a God who makes a final judgment; a final separation. A reminder that scripture conveys a view of history with a beginning and end, and the end is usually told to end in some form of judgment.

- 2) A second struggle I have with this teaching is how “Black and White” it is. For me, as for many of you, Either-Or/Black and White thinking and theology almost always ruffles me, or at least makes me pause. I feel hesitation with anything that makes things too clean and simple. I cringe everytime I hear someone begin with the phrase, “You know, there are two kinds of people in this world....” Whatever comes after that opener, it is the beginning that makes me cringe, that anyone - about anything - could believe there are only two kinds of people in this world. But here, in this final teaching, Jesus seems to be telling us, “You know, there are two kinds of people in this world: those who care of the poor and marginalized, and those who don’t.”

- 3) But probably, what is most difficult for me in this parable of the sheep and goats, is the overarching idea that it is one way or the other. For almost all of us, we do these things some of the time, but not all of the time. Very few people do these things NONE of the time.
 - a) “I was hungry and you fed me.” Yes, sometimes. Sometimes I give to one asking for money; sometimes I am moved by an image and situation and send extra funds. Sometimes I do not.

- b) "I was ill and you comforted me." Yes, I have done this a few times; many times I have not. Sometimes I forget - sometimes I am busy.
- c) "I was naked and you clothed me." Yes, I have given lots of clothing away to people in need of clothing. And yes, I have 6 coats and 15 pairs of shoes and more socks than I can fit into my sock drawer.

Is doing these things sometimes enough? How do we distinguish? Can we know before the end?

I am not really sure what to do with these lingering questions and difficulties that I have with this passage - with this final teaching of Jesus. But, probably, in the end, I am just trying to complicate a bit what Jesus is trying to make simple; I am trying to muddy the waters a bit of what Jesus is clearly asking of me.

Fred Craddock says, if we know we are going to face a final exam of one question and we are told by the examiner what that question is to be, then we should probably spend a lot of time and energy preparing to answer that one question.²

And the question is, how did you respond to human need? That's it. According to this teaching/parable of Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, that is the question of final judgment: how have we met human need; how have we related to the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the pushed out and forgotten? How have we considered those who are least often considered?

I was alone. I had no one in the the world. My husband died. My children lived far away in another state. I had to go to a care facility. Did you come and visit me?

² From Fred Craddock's sermon, "When He Shall Come." From *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*.

I was in prison, cut off from society for my mistakes and wrong-doings; remembered only for the worst thing I have ever done. A criminal, yes. I have hurt people, yes. Still a human being, yes. Did you come and visit me?

I was thirsty. I faced draught and had to migrate. My water was polluted by the ways of consumerism and endless consumption; my drinking source contaminated by your need for oil and cheap plastics and lack of care for who lived downstream. Did you give me something to drink? Help me access clean water?

I was hungry and without a home. I was hungry because of the wars of this nation; I was hungry because of apathy. The food that an average American family throws into garbage cans and down disposals could easily have fed my entire family. Did you offer me anything to eat?

I was without clothing, looking into the shop windows, gazing at the wardrobes of the world. I waited for styles to change hoping for an old coat or dress to be tossed my way. Did you offer me anything to wear?

I was a stranger; new at this job; new in this neighborhood; new in this building; new in this city; new in this country. I did not know a soul. Did you introduce yourself to me? Invite me over to sit on your porch?³

I want to end with a prayer, it is from the back of our Hymnal, what Kathy Railsback has called a “dangerous prayer.” I had added to it a bit to include this final teaching of Jesus. Hear this as our final prayer:

Gracious God,

We thank you for gifts that belong not to us alone, but to all our sisters and brothers, since they, too, are created in your image. Since they too, are you.

Let their need become our need; their hunger become our hunger; their thirst become our thirst.

Their loneliness become our loneliness; their incarceration become our incarceration;

Their sickness become our sickness; their homeless become our homelessness;

Their nakedness become our nakedness; their need for refuge become our need for refuge.

³ These closing lines are also adapted from Fred Craddock’s sermon, “When He Shall Come.”

So that in sharing ourselves, we discover the Christ who walks with our brothers and sisters;
We discover the Christ who is our brothers and sisters.⁴
Amen.

⁴ Adapted from Hymnal: A Worship book, No. 750.