

Good News for the Least (Soon and Very Soon)

Matthew 25: 31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for 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 did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

There's an icon in the Orthodox church interpreting this parable called "The Last Judgement." There's Jesus on his throne, angels hovering all around him. There's Mary on one side and Joseph on the other. On the right side of Jesus are the sheep—or the saints—they ascending into the sky blue light. On the other side, however—on the wrong side—are the goats who are being swallowed up by a sea of flames. It's a scary scene. But what's interesting to me about the painting is what is on everyone's heads. On the sheep's side their heads are surrounded by halos, but on the goat's side, most of them are all wearing crowns.

There is a difference between a halo and a crown isn't there? And while the icon might be a bit dramatic, it is how some of us might depict the parable of the separation between the sheep and the goats. The sheep ascending into eternal bliss, while the goats drown in a pit of fire. One side wearing halos, the other side sporting crowns.

At first, it might feel kind of juicy to think about. All the kings of our world meeting the true king and justice will finally be served! Jesus, sitting as judge over everyone, obviously sharing my opinion regarding social policy. Obviously condemning those greedy, mean-spirited one percenters! You know those who control our society, those who profit on prisons, those who get richer by making the poor poorer. For a moment I think, *finally! It's about time!* But just when I cozy up to the idea of me being one of the righteousness ones, I remember the homeless person

who held up a sign at the corner of the intersection and when our eyes met I quickly pretended to look at my phone. Then there was that time at the gas station when I was buying gas for someone who needed help. I was feeling good about it, but on my way out the door someone else asked me for some money because they needed a room at the nearby hotel. When I said I was out of cash, he said, “You will have to answer to Jesus just like everyone else!” I mean, he’s right, but how much can one person do? That’s our tension, isn’t it?

The truth is the parable feels like that Netflix show called *The Good Place* where we get points for all the good deeds we do so that when our number gets called, we end up in the good place. Except on the show the point system is rigged, and nobody can actually get to the “Good Place” because even our most charitable deeds have a shadow side with unintended consequences. It’s like which is better for the environment: a refrigerator with freon that lasts 50 years, or a eco-friendly refrigerator that ends up in a landfill in five? Life is a complicated mixture of helping those in need while missing opportunities to help someone else. It is a mixture of providing band-aid solutions to really urgent problems and also doing the long uphill work of changing the system so these problems no longer exist. It is a mixture far more complicated than simply separating sheep on the right and goats on the left.

But the point of the parable isn’t moralism. Thank God! The point of the parable isn’t earning enough points to get right with our Maker. The point is that both the sheep and the goats don’t realize they have done anything right or anything wrong. The sheep serve the poor, the homeless, the sick, the vulnerable without hesitation, not because they want to get right with God, but because that is simply who they are. But the goats don’t serve the poor, the homeless, the imprisoned because that is the life they have chosen to lead. As a wise woman recently said, “The actions that matter the most are the actions done when nobody is looking.”

It turns out, in God’s kingdom those who are the least in the society are the greatest, because they are the ones who determine the collective health of the rest of us. Because it is our treatment of the least which reflects back to us the honest truth about who we are as a people. So when we hear politicians go on and on about capturing and deporting the stranger, that is a reflection of our collective health. When we hear about the poor and incarcerated being used as scapegoats to pad the wallets of the wealthy, that is a reflection of our collective health. When we look at the sick and our health care system or how we buckle to the NRA, that is an honest reflection of who we are. As talk show host, Stephen Colbert once said, “If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it.” Both the sheep and the goats have no clue what they did or didn’t do to help the Lord, it was a surprise to both sides; because the actions that matter the most are those done while nobody is looking.

So as a Matthew 25 church we get to go deeper with building up power through community. We get to help others at Bolton Food Pantry or by simply shopping at SHARE grocery store. We get to help by advocating for the poor by speaking truth to power and reshaping policy. We get to serve Christ in normal everyday kind of ways, not as a way of earning points, but simply because *that is who we are*.

At the end of the day, we know we are loved and are trying to do something with it.
At the end of the day, we know our blessings are only blessings if we share them with others.
At the end of the day, we know we belong to the king with the halo rather than the king with the crown.

And soon and very soon we are going to see the king, NOT because of the final judgment, but because we see Christ everyday: in the face of the stranger, the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable, and the lonely.

So may we have the eyes to see the image of God in everyone, the ears to hear what is true, and the grace to do something about it, until that day when the least in our world reflect back to us the collective Love which has always been there, always shaping us, always reminding us of who we really are together.

Soon and very soon. Amen.