

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Church
Matthew 25:31-41
Text: Matthew 25:37a

St. John's Presbyterian
Devon, Pennsylvania
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SEEING MORE THAN JESUS

Our parable from the first lesson has had many interpreters, but the best one perhaps never wrote a single theological treatise. Yet his theological insights were of the first order. His medium was not pen and paper but wet plaster and stone. He wrote not in words but in stunning, flying images that seem to hang in space, transfixing viewers who gaze like supplicants beholding heaven, open mouthed, awed, small beneath the vastness of his canopies. He was Michelangelo Buonarroti, and in his biblical images in the frescoes of Rome's Sistine Chapel his genius captures the complete spirit and the intent of this parable of the last judgment. In the parable of the last judgment complacency is shaken to its roots, and grace seldom shone more brightly. For on the faces of *both* the righteous and the unrighteous is registered the most stunning, total surprise. It is surprise in double measure, disbelief variously mixed among the chosen and the rejected. The righteous are astonished to discover that they have been ministering to Christ through their compassion to others, while the unrighteous, believing themselves to have been faithful, discover that the criteria for selection is one that had never occurred to them—again, it is compassion.

The parable begins with an image of a shepherd, like that in Ezekiel. In this case he is separating the sheep from the goats. In Palestine, shepherds commonly herded sheep and goats together for grazing, depending on the pasture and terrain. At night they were separated because goats prefer communal warmth while sheep favor open air. John Broadus, on a visit to the Holy Land in the late 1800's was intrigued to see a shepherd at close of day walking to the head of the mixed flock, then signaling the sheep to approach him he touched them one by one with his staff as they passed by, sending the sheep off to his right and the goats to his left. But the separation had to be done with a keen and discerning eye. Sheep in Palestine are not traditionally white, as in the West, nor are the goats normally dark as we are used to seeing them. Each species varies tremendously, sharing shades of

brown, grey and speckled patterns. When the fleece of the sheep has been sheered they can be especially difficult to tell apart. On an old Assyrian clay tablet of a single sheep and a goat being driven, only the animal's face gives a hint of the difference. But the discerning eye of the good shepherd knows them well.

It can be hard, outwardly, then, to tell the sheep from the goats. It can be hard, outwardly to tell the righteous from the unrighteous—as we spoke of last week, the faithful from the lax, the beaming, benevolent lines of the face from the contrary inclinations of the heart.

So something other than right or wrong pedigree, or outward appearance, or belonging to the right nation, race or group has to set the chosen apart from the unchosen, the blessed from the rejected. Something other than a careful checking off of do's and don'ts. If it is going to be fair, whatever the line of demarcation is, it has to be free from special insider knowledge that frees the privileged, like responding to a check list of ritual obligations. It needs to be less of the head than of the heart, just like the motivations of our Lord himself.

What saves the righteous in our parable, then, is that they saw another's pain and felt their hurt; or saw another's lack and felt the anguish of the void as if it were their own. They empathized. They did not see Jesus in the other person and say, I will do this because Jesus wills it, or to be obedient. They acted out of deep concern while *not seeing* Jesus. And thereby is the stunning irony of the parable. They acted out of *blind* compassion. "When did we see you in this or that state?" they ask, astonished, "we have no recollection." That very question poses another question: Is God's salvation, then, blind to religious distinction where compassion holds true, where goodness is done for its own beautiful sake by people of other faiths with no knowledge or consciousness of Christ? I think of the apostle Peter preaching, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

And that is the bliss of it, says Jesus, the sheer grace of it. To act with compassion, as we breathe, like breathing in a need and breathing out a response. It is this very anonymity that frees us from falling back into the clutches of that righteousness from which the Protestant churches sought to extricate themselves in the Reformation, the belief that we can curry favor with God by doing the things that please God, as if God were some mercurial deity who is appeased by our good works. What they did, implies Jesus, was so unconscious, they simply identified with another's humanity, as your own.

An aged grandmother who barely attended school once gave her granddaughter a slip of paper with all the advice she would ever need to lead a good life. This is what she wrote:

Wash what is dirty.
Water what is dry.
Heal what is wounded.
Warm what is cold.
Guide what goes off the road.
And love people who are the least loveable because they need it most.

In the context of these thoughts I want to extend a challenge to you. I want to ask you, in the privacy of your own thoughts, to cast your mind over the people among your regular circle of acquaintance, and choose someone to quietly, secretly build up. They must not know. Choose someone who is hard to get along with, perhaps a colleague in the workplace, a family member, someone in school, wherever. Without advertisement or announcement quietly commit to a year of simple kindness, even hard fought patience, a year of creative, intelligent, imaginative work on your part to change the relationship from sour to sweet, from negative to positive. I say a year because it takes that long for most people to begin to respond to change. Choose one person, and ask Christ for the fortitude, the wisdom and the grace to see it through. Then watch what happens. The object, implies Jesus in the parable, is that we might cultivate a personal goodness and influence.

Evelyn Underhill, one of the great spiritual figures of the last century, has written,

Each time you take a human soul with you into your prayer, you accept from God a piece of spiritual work with all its implications and with all its cost. . . . [When you do this] you are offering . . . to share the saving work of Christ.

Isn't it odd, the placement of this parable, especially at the capstone of this most doctrinal of all the gospels. Just when it seems so appropriate to sum all the teaching up with a neat little signature phrase, or a test of faith, perhaps, such as Luke suggests in Acts— "Those who confess the name of Jesus shall be saved!"—just here, Jesus says: You who have no conscious thought of me in your acts of kindness, are of all people most blessed. This is goodness that springs like grace from the heart of a child. And it can save and teach and heal. It can give away the bliss that every soul secretly, often unconsciously yearns for, the peace and acceptance of Jesus Christ. Amen.