

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24  
Matthew 25:31-41

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

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? *Matthew 25:37*

Perhaps the best interpreter of our parable never wrote a theological treatise. He wrote not in words but in stunning, flying images that seemed to hang in space, transfixing viewers who gaze like supplicants beholding heaven, beneath the vastness of his canopies. He was Michelangelo Buonarroti. And in his biblical images in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel his genius captures on the faces of *both* the righteous and the unrighteous stunning and total surprise. In the parable of the Last Judgment the righteous are astonished to discover that they have been ministering *to Christ* whenever they ministered compassion to others, while the unrighteous, thinking themselves faithful, discover that the criteria for selection never occurred to them—again, it is compassion.

The parable begins with an image, like that in Ezekiel, of a shepherd. In this case he is separating the sheep from the goats. Sheep and goats were traditionally herded together by shepherds in Palestine. Depending on the pasture and terrain, sometimes they were allowed to intermingle as they grazed by day. But at night they were separated, because while goats prefer communal warmth, sheep favor the open air. One of the best biblical commentators of the nineteenth-century, John A. Broadus, on a visit to the Holy Land in the late 1800's was intrigued to see a shepherd walking to the head of a mixed flock, and signaling the animals to approach him he touched them one by one with his staff as they passed, sending the sheep off to his right and the goats to his left. Yet the separation had to be done with a keen, discerning eye. Sheep in Palestine are not traditionally white, nor are goats typically dark, as we are used to in the west. Each species varies tremendously, sharing shades of brown, grey and speckled patterns. When the fleece of the sheep or goat has been sheered they can be especially difficult to tell apart. On an ancient Assyrian clay tablet depicting 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. We know from our own experience how hard it can be to read the character of someone from an incidental encounter. It's hard to tell the righteous from the unrighteous, the faithful from the lax, the beaming, benevolent lines of the face from the contrary inclinations of the heart. Something other than right or wrong pedigree, 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. Now, what saves the righteous in our parable is precisely that they did not make human distinctions or evaluations. They acted, rather, like the blindfolded figure of "Justice" on the top of England's Old Bailey courthouse. When they saw another's pain, they felt their hurt; or saw another's lack and felt the anguish of their void, as if it were their own. They did not see Jesus in the other person and say, I

will do this because Jesus wills it, or to be obedient. They did it, *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.”

“And that is the bliss of it,” says Jesus. “That is 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 works righteousness, that insidious proposal that we can curry favor with God by doing the things that please God—like cozying up to the principal when you were in grade school; or to the boss. What you did, implies Jesus, was so unconscious; you simply identified with another's humanity, as your own.

An aged grandmother who never attended school, wanted to give her granddaughter all the advice she would ever need to lead a good life. So she handed her a slip of paper on which was written:

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 acquaintances and choose someone to quietly, secretly build up. They must not know. Choose someone whom you find 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 couple of months of simple kindness, perhaps hard fought patience, a season of creative, intelligent, imaginative work on your part to change the relationship from sour to sweet, from negative to positive. 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 purpose, implies Jesus in the parable, is that we might cultivate a personal goodness and influence that grows much like grass, a covering of infinite complexity made up of little shoots of creative goodness that covers the earth like a rich blanket.

Evelyn Underhill, one of the great spiritual figures of the twentieth-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.

In this parable we are right at the end of all of Jesus' teaching in Matthew. Just when it seems so appropriate for him to sum everything with a neat little signature phrase, a test of faith, perhaps, such as Luke suggests in Acts, “Those who confess the name of Jesus shall be saved!”—Jesus instead says, ‘You who have no conscious thought of me in your acts of kindness, are of all people most blessed.’ Amen.