

³¹ “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.³² 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,³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.³⁴ 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;³⁵ 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,³⁶ 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.’³⁷ 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?’³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?’³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’⁴⁰ 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.’⁴¹ 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;⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,⁴³ 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.’⁴⁴ 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?’⁴⁵ 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.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

My preaching professor has written that a religious reader is a slow reader. He says, "If anything gets gutted in reading, it will be the interpreter, not the text." When I read Matthew 25, I tend to feel gutted.

"I was hungry, and you gave me no food. (ugh.) I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink. (ugh) ...and these will go away to eternal punishment." Is anyone else feeling a little squeamish here? Preacher, don't you know it's supposed to be thanksgiving? Shouldn't we be talking about gutting a turkey?

Well, friends, today is actually Christ the King Sunday. It's the last Sunday of the Christian year, when we celebrate the coming reign of Christ, we look to the future when this new reality that Jesus inaugurated will really come in full. If you were casually reading through Matthew, Chapter 25, before you came this morning you would have been coasting from parable to parable, from the faithful and unfaithful servants, to the ten bridesmaids, to the talents, hearing all about waiting for, and preparing for the day that Christ will return. And then--ziiip-- suddenly in verse 31, we're there! Jesus has come again, and we are gathered with all nations around the throne. And to our surprise, for all of the focus there

has been on that day, that far-off day in the future, that some glad morning, according to this parable, all that Jesus seems to want to talk about on that day is actually what is...and is not happening right now.

Yesterday before the rains came I took my daughter with me in the stroller for my walk and--she's almost three, so she's really at an age of wonder and excitement at the world around her and what she sees. So we were having fun looking for leaves that are changing color, looking for red leaves especially. And we'd be going along and I'd see a tree coming over here (gesturing ahead on the right) and I'd say "Oh, I see some red ones" and invariably she would turn and say "Where?" And she doesn't know her right from her left yet, at least not reliably, so I'd say "No, it's up ahead on the right," and she'd be looking over here on the left and eventually I'd just have to reach down where she could see my hand and point her in the right direction. A couple of times I finally gave up and said "Ok we missed it, let's find the next one."

Sometimes it's just hard to know what we are looking for, isn't it?

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison?" Lord, you must not have been wearing your messianic name tag that day because we didn't see you.

Wouldn't it be easier if Jesus would just wear a name tag? Help us to know, Lord, when it's you, when it's you hiding out in the face of the least of these. If you're in the prison, Lord, just let us know which one so we can come and see you. It's already enough of a shock to have the Son of God, the King of the universe hiding out under bridges and in prisons, but, Lord, couldn't you just help us out by letting us know which one is you?

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." That phrase, the least of these. The Message paraphrases it "Someone overlooked or ignored." I've also heard it paraphrased as "those for whom you feel least responsible."

Those for whom you feel least responsible. Those whose lives you are not socially obligated to care about. Not your children, not your parents, not your family or

your closest friends. Just somebody. Somebody sick; somebody hungry; somebody looking for help.

You know, the most striking thing about this parable is this--neither group recognized Jesus. Neither the sheep nor the goats. "Lord, when did we see you?" They both ask. The parable is actually not about being able to see Jesus in the faces of those in need--it's about having reached out, having connected with those in need, regardless of whether or not we believe we are serving Christ. The sheep are just as oblivious as the goats on this one--they don't realize that it's Jesus that they are feeding and visiting and serving and loving; they are simply going on with applying the time and the gifts and whatever they have to respond to the needs of those in their path.

I know some of you are familiar with the blog "Humans of New York." On this site, a guy named Brandon Stanton posts a picture of a person every day or so, and he includes a little snippet of something they said or a story they told while he was taking their picture. The blog gives millions of people around the world a glimpse into the life of a different stranger each day. Back in August, Brandon was in Uganda, doing the same work, and he came across this man:
(Picture)

And this is what he said, "A few years ago, I got a call on my cell phone from a twelve year old child from my village. He was calling from a bus stop. He had taken a bus into the city alone, and he was calling me to ask if I could help him find a way to go to school. Both of his parents had died of AIDS, and he had no money for tuition. I told him to stay where he was, and left work immediately to pick him up. Even though I was suffering myself, I told him I would try to help him. My salary was not enough, so I tried many things to get the money. After work, I went to the landfill to hunt for recyclables. Now I'm trying to make bricks. I have a small operation in the village to make bricks, and I sell them in the city. It doesn't make much money, but it's enough to pay tuition for the boy and three of his siblings."

Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.

When I first saw this story, it was attached to one brief comment from our children's director, Hillary, her comment that summed it up: We belong to each other.

And if I can carry it further, we belong to each other because we belong to Jesus; because we believe that Jesus finds his way to the hard places in life, to the suffering places, and that is where he chooses to hang out. Jesus finds his way to those whose lives often seem invisible to others; he finds his way to those whose needs are so great that we would really rather just pray that Jesus would continue to go there and that would be enough. But when I think of the margins of my own life, when I have been sick or when I have momentarily been a stranger, uncomfortable in a place that is not home, I know that I wished someone would do more than simply pray for Jesus to be with me. I know that in those moments, however small or insignificant, I longed for someone to reach out, to be present, and to say "We belong to each other." How much more this must be true for those who have lived entire lifetimes on the margins, those who have, for the same lifetime, been invisible to me, blending into the doors of an apartment complex, hidden inside a news statistic. Could it be that I belong to them, too, and they belong to me, just as my own children, my own brothers, my own sisters?

When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, read this text, he read verse 44, when the goat begin to answer for this accusation, and Wesley remarked that the wicked will endeavor, will try, to justify themselves forever, even on the day of judgment. I don't know about you, but I have many "buts." I have many good reasons why I do not have the time to attend to someone else's needs; I have enough people to take care of. According to the parable, we all would be found unacceptable; we all have turned our eye, quickened our step, avoided a call. We all will fall short of this selfless, generous, righteous life that God expects. Welcome, friends, to the front door of grace. We cannot do all that is expected of us. We are left to rely on the grace of the shepherd king, the one who tends both sheep and goats, the one who claims us and cleans us, who makes of us something more than our broken selves can be. As we heard the psalmist say, "It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." We belong to each other; and we belong to God. And it is for that that we Give thanks and bless his name.

Summary: In this parable, Jesus shows us that his reign is enfleshed in us through the ways we care for others, particularly for those we feel least responsible for. In the end, however, his reign will come by grace, not by our good works.