

Living an Ethical Life; a Reflection on Matthew 25; Dale Ramerman; 11/26/2017; Yr A, Last Sunday after Pentecost; Matthew 25:31-46.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

First, a reminder. When I preach, I am speaking on behalf of no one but myself. You are hearing my understanding, as a lay person, although one who has been in church most Sundays of my 76 years. I hope my views are shaped by the good news of the Gospel of Christ, but you can judge that for yourself.

We have reached the last Sunday after Pentecost, and the end of the church year, a Sunday designated in recent years as Christ the King Sunday. The processional cross we used this morning, is the Christ the King Cross, given to the our Church by Fr. Melvin and Grace Brown.

For much of this liturgical year, we've been reading the Gospel of Matthew. Beginning with Jesus' genealogy, we have moved through the birth narratives, Jesus and his parents fleeing as refugees to Egypt, the ministry of John the Baptist, and Jesus' teaching and miracles. Our Gospel reading today is the last of Jesus teachings in the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel concludes with accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection, stories we read during Lent and Easter.

Today in our Gospel reading, we hear about a final judgment. All the nations are gathered before The Christ seated on his throne. Christ divides the people before him into two groups, the sheep and the goats. Sheep and goats were often raised together in Jesus' day and probably still are. But on cold winter nights in Palestine when it may snow on the hills, while the sheep can survive outside, the goats can not. So the goats had to be separated out and brought into the house, which in biblical times was often a

limestone cave.

But in our gospel reading, the tables are turned. The sheep, those people on who are on Jesus' right, are promised the kingdom prepared for them since creation; on Jesus' left are the goats, the people condemned to spend eternity in hell, in the always smoking garbage dump outside the city walls.

If you take this account as a literal depiction of the final judgment, it is the only such description in the New Testament. Our understanding of a final judgment, heaven and hell, however, are largely shaped by the writing of the 17th century English poet, John Milton, and not by what the Biblical writings actually say.

Many Christians do read the final judgment portion of today's Gospel, literally, conflating it with the Book of Revelation, to construct a dramatic apocalyptic reading. That is not my view of our reading from Matthew or the Book of Revelation. I suggest it is important in reading scripture to read it in its context, and to consider what type of literature we're reading. I think speculation about the apocalypse is a major distraction from Jesus's life, teachings, death and resurrection.

So if our gospel reading is not prophecy, what is it? I hear our Gospel reading as a parable told by Jesus to teach, and not a prophesy about the end of the world.

In our parable of Jesus and the final judgment, I think the most important part of the story is the criteria Jesus uses to separate human kind into the two groups. Nothing about their beliefs or acknowledgment of who they believe Christ to be. Rather, Jesus decides based on whether they have lived a particular form of ethical life: how have they treated the least among us: have they fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, welcomed the refugees, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison? And Jesus says when you do these acts of mercy for the poorest among you, it is

as if you are doing it to Jesus.

But many commentators have been loath to give this passage a straight forward reading, claiming such a reading would conflict with the writings of the Apostle Paul, who wrote, for example, that we are saved by God's grace and not our good works. The Apostle Paul's teaching became the mantra of the Reformation, something we have been reminded of this 500th anniversary: "Salvation by Grace, Not By Works." And yet, our gospel reading seems to suggest salvation is for those who do a certain kind of good works, commonly called works of mercy.

I'll outline few examples of this dodging and jumping around to avoid a strait forward reading of Jesus' parable of a final judgment. One leader of the Reformation, John Calvin, argues that Jesus was merely exhorting believers to live a holy and upright life, and is not suggesting that we would enjoy any benefit by showing tangible compassion for the marginalized of the world. Rather, writes Calvin, Jesus is encouraging his followers by assuring them the good and bad will not enjoy the same fate upon death.

Many commentators, to avoid what Jesus seems to be saying, have focused on the phrase "all the nations." They argue that "all the nations" does not mean everybody, but rather just the nations of the Middle East during the early years of Christianity, some of which welcomed or tolerated new churches and some of which persecuted Christians.

Thus, the argument goes, the story of the sheep and goats was included in Matthew's gospel to threaten those that persecuted the early church with the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his cohorts.

One commentator writes that to take what Jesus seems to be teaching at face value could not possibly be right because it would require us to believe:

"We are justified [or made right before God] neither by grace nor even by accepting the Gospel, but by how we treat other

persons. We are justified before God by works that are shaped not only by the pursuit of justice, but by a particular understanding of justice focused on the treatment of 'the least of these'."

Yes. A particular understanding of justice that gives preference to those who are weak, the vulnerable, the little ones, particularly the children. Isn't this what we hear Jesus teaching us, by words and example, throughout the Gospels? Jesus explicitly commands us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger or alien, care for the sick. I believe Jesus' criteria for separating the sheep from the goats is entirely consistent with his teachings about the importance of the ethical life Jesus repeatedly, by word and example, exhorts us to live.

Well, I cannot purport to reconcile today's gospel reading with the Apostle Paul's teaching, or the theology of the great reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. As one commentator says, theologians have tied themselves in knots trying to do just that. But, nor will I distort Jesus' teaching to make it mesh with the Apostle Paul's writings, or, for that matter, my own theology.

In today's reading, I think Jesus, in his parable of the sheep, goats and final judgment, is saying, forcefully, at least four things.

First, Jesus is telling us that there are consequences that follow from the actions we take or do not take. He makes this point by saying it's like being summoned before a judge to account for what we have done or not done. Life is not a game.

Second, Jesus is telling us that, being created in God's image, we are expected to love generously, particularly with acts of kindness extended to those who have nothing to give in return. Notice that in Jesus' parable of the final judgment, those who are marked for eternal life are surprised to learn they had cared for Jesus when he was

naked, sick and in prison. When did we do that? they asked. Jesus answers, when you did to the least of these, you did it to me. Those who had cared for the sick and homeless had simply shared who they were and what they had with the least among them, shared freely, without calculation or expectation of benefit for themselves. So often Christianity is sold as a matter of self interest, a ticket to heaven, a strategy for material prosperity, or a tax deduction.

The particular type of generosity to which Jesus calls us, is a response to God's grace and love extended to human kind from beginning with creation. It's not a question of what's in it for us; acting out of self interest always risks compromise.

Third, Jesus says, get your hands dirty, take risks, engage with the homeless and destitute rather than avoiding them. How easy it is for me to look the other way.

Finally, I think Jesus is explaining what it means to be his follower. Following Jesus will change our life, our values, our actions, our hopes, in ways that will be apparent to others. People will know you are a Christian by your love expressed in acts of mercy.

Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus condemns the religious leaders of his day by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.”

Jesus, who said about himself, I came, not to be served, but to serve, demands of us, who profess to be his followers, service, care, mercy, freely extended to those in need. So let's work individually and collectively to sustain our community acts of mercy, for example, by getting involved in visiting the sick, the lonely, those in prison; the prayer quilt

ministry; the summer learning program for immigrant children; the cold weather shelter; the Red Door; Dinner at the Brick. Make a difference for someone in need.

And when you are asked for a handout by someone on the street, or outside Safeway, give them a dollar, or five, with a friendly smile. Ask and call them by their name. And, don't fret about whether they will use what you give, wisely or foolishly. Treat them as beloved by God, entitled to respect, and not just a nameless barrier in your way.

As a follower of Christ, this is what God's Spirit calls us, motivates us and empowers us to do.

AMEN

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