

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/JULY 19, 2009

WHERE'S JESUS? / MATTHEW 25:31-46

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I. THE TEXT

Not everything Jesus tells us is sweet, not everything He asks of us is easy. But the difficult words of Jesus are no less important than his words of comfort. And as Christians we are called to take all of his words to heart. Hear the Word of God from Matthew's gospel...

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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then 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?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

II. PRAYER: O God, breathe life into these words, bring hearing to our ears, grant grace in our doing of your work and will. AMEN.

III. SORTING HAT

He's back – Harry Potter that is. Gary and I gobbled up the Harry Potter series – Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter so ably take on epic themes of good and evil, justice and love, selfishness and selflessness. At the beginning of each volume, the young wizards board the magical Hogwarts Express – destination Hogwarts school, where they spend the year studying such subjects as “Defense Against the Dark Arts,” “Potions,” and

“Care of Magical Creatures.” On the first day of the school year, the students all assemble in the grand dining room where new students take their turn sitting under the Hogwarts Sorting Hat.

The Sorting Hat does just that – it sorts the young wizards into houses – houses, sort of like fraternities that become a wizard’s family for the rest of their Hogwarts years. As the Hat hovers over each young wizard’s head it has the ability to look and see what resides deep in the soul. If it sees courage, daring and chivalry in the nervous young wizard, he or she is sorted into the Gryffindor House. Loyalty, tolerance and fair play in the soul of another lands them in Hufflepuff. Those with intelligence, creativity and wisdom are sorted into the Ravenclaw House. But, if the Sorting Hat detects cunning and ruthlessness, or the hunger for power, it is off to the dark and ugly Slytherin House they go, where evil always seems to lurk.

IV. JUDGMENT, REALLY?

While it will not happen via a Sorting Hat, in today’s text Jesus tells us that we too will be sorted... traditional Christian language calls it judgment. Jesus will be the one doing the sorting. Professor Barbara Brown Taylor tells of her visit to the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. The doors into the cathedral are huge – “with,” she writes, “creation scenes carved into the arches above them: the birth of the moon on the right side, the sun on the left, and in the middle, the first human beings, their graceful forms emerging from the swirling waters of creation...” You enter the cathedral and make your way finally to the front, to the high altar, “where Jesus sits on his throne at the end of time, surrounded by the whole company of heaven as he balances the round earth on the palm of his hand. It is Christ the king, preparing to judge the world, preparing to evaluate everything that has happened since all things came to be.” Taylor reflects, “That is the brilliance of the cathedral. Even the most casual tourist enters through the doorway of creation and winds up at the altar of the last judgment, moving from the beginning of time to the end, to stand before the One who will sort out everything that has happened in between.”¹¹

No mistaking it. This morning’s text gives us a head’s up that we will one day find ourselves in that ultimate sorting scene. “Wait, isn’t that just some antiquated fundamentalist religious folklore that we’ve become sophisticated enough to dismiss?” Who of us spends time fretting about the celestial sorting process? Well, if we take Jesus seriously, pondering the end is not such a bad idea. Christ the King, the judge, who knows all we are and all we do will do one final, grand, sort... pretty sobering, isn’t it? Surely I could have found something a bit more upbeat for a beautiful summer morning?

You mean I’ll be accountable for my life? For all I’ve done and left undone? Wait just a minute pastor, just last month you quoted Karl Barth saying, “Jesus loves me this I know,” and just a few weeks ago you reminded us of Jesus’ presence in the winds and the waves of

life. Now you're telling us there's a catch? If that's not a classic bait and switch, I don't know what is.

V. SHEEP AND GOATS

Well, let's look at the text. These are Jesus' words – but they are not so much threats and scare tactics as they are reminders that our lives matter. Who we become and what we do shapes our us, and our world. Jesus draws a picture for his listeners – and for us – to let us know that our choices have consequences. The scene is this – life on earth is all wrapped up and Jesus sits on the throne – all the nations, as far as the eye can see, will be gathered there around him. In that final judgment, looking into our hearts and minds reviewing what we have done with our lives, like a shepherd, Jesus will sort humanity into two groups – the sheep and the goats.

To the sheep on his right, Jesus says, “welcome to the kingdom of heaven prepared for you from the beginning of the world.” And then he tells them why the welcome mat is out. “You fed me when I was hungry, offered me water when I was parched. You gave me clothes when I needed them, nursed me when I was sick – and when I was feeling all alone, you invited me to sit with you at your table.” Notice Jesus did not say – welcome to the kingdom because you were so darned pious (though he would commend piety) – rather, welcome because you paid attention to the poor – you cared for the wounded – you tended to the lost – you treated them like family – like they mattered.

And then Jesus turns to his left – to the goats. Maybe it is just my soft heart, but I hear not anger, but sorrow in his voice as he tells them why their fate will be fire. “You did **not** feed me, you refused me water. My clothes were in shreds while your closets were jammed. Ill, in prison, alone – you simply ignored me. You did not do what I made you for – and suffering was – and will be – your consequence.”

VI. JESUS EVERYWHERE

It is curious to me that both the sheep and the goats are baffled by the verdicts Jesus hands down – the sheep did not understand what they'd done right and the goats did not know what they'd done wrong. Sheep and goats alike said, “wait just a second, just when was it that we saw you – hungry or alone or sick – best we can tell we never saw you at all?!”

But Jesus disagrees. “You didn't notice me, but I was there. You saw me all the time – even when you did not know it – I was the guest at PATH, the panhandler on the street, the welfare mom in the line in front of you at Ralph's. You bumped into me everywhere – the server at John O'Groats when your food wasn't cooked just right, the son or daughter who just wanted a little more of your time. Jesus will say to the sheep and the goats – “Do you remember how you treated them? I do. That was me.”

Ouch! This is not the preferred Jesus – please, just give us the one who walks and talks with us alone in the garden. Let’s get back to comfort and grace. This is Jesus with a bit of a bite.

When it comes to that final judgment I, like you, would really like to be numbered among the sheep. But, if I am bumping into Jesus in every person I meet – well... that’s a lot of pressure. Oh, this **is** a tough passage. Jesus says that what we do matters... but I don’t always know what to do. Do I give money to every hungry person at every intersection? How much of my security do I risk? And there are no simple answers given in Matthew’s gospel. Yet, this passage calls us to wrestle with our relationship with the hungry, the stranger, the poor... the least, the lowly, the forgotten. Apparently, pretending they do not exist is not an option.

Last summer I spent a week in San Francisco. I’d taken BART from the airport, towing my overstuffed suitcase and briefcase for a week of study leave. I exited the subway at the Embarcadero stop only to discover that the escalator was out of order with no elevator in sight. It was not an ordinary 1-floor shopping mall escalator, this was an escalator from the deepest bowels of the earth – an eternal escalator. I stopped to evaluate my options, knowing there was no way I could lug both of my bags up those stairs. I could do it one bag at a time but I was quite certain the bag I would need to leave behind would not be there upon my return. From the dark of the subway tunnel some nice gentleman approached me from behind and said, “you look like you could use some help.” I admitted as much. He grabbed my suitcase and wrestled it to the top of the stairs. In the light of day, I could see what I had not seen on the dark platform – he was obviously homeless, tattered and sunburned. His sad story poured out – could I help? Well of course I could help – and I did.

That was the simple Jesus decision of that week. As you well know, in San Francisco, Jesus sits every 30 feet or so, cup in hand. I don’t always know the right thing to do. Is it always best to hand a street person a buck – especially the one with the sign that reads, “just being honest – need some beer?” Should we believe every hard luck story we hear? Oh, this **is** a difficult passage. Jesus says that what we do matters but I don’t always know what to do.

VII. WHO DO YOU SEE?

Back to Jesus’ description of the final judgment – I imagine the sheep – baffled – are nonetheless delighted. But you can almost see the argument form on the lips of the goat coalition. “Lord, if only we’d known it was you we’d have done things differently, if only we’d known that was you dying of AIDS at the VA hospital. If only we knew you were sleeping in the parking lot at church. If only we’d known you were the child whose family could not afford a doctor. If only we’d known, we’d have done things differently. If only we’d known.”

Maybe that’s why Jesus tells this tough story – because now... now we do know. Jesus is out and about and all around – there’s not a day goes by that we do not see him – **every**

time we are confronted with human need we are seeing Jesus. And how we treat Jesus, how we treat the little and the lost and the least is the only question on the final exam. Jesus asks – do you love me enough to love them – because when you love them, you love me, and when you do not love them, you do not love me.

Do we love the people that Jesus loves? Do we even see them? And if we see them, do we see them as God sees them – as cherished, beloved, valuable, worth our time and money and energy? We may not always know the right thing to do, or how best to do it, but we always know whether we have a right heart in their direction. We may not always give the street person a few bucks, because that is not always the right thing to do – but we can treat them with the dignity we would want for ourselves – we can look into their eyes and recognize their humanity – we can see in their eyes the eyes of Christ.

We may not be able to educate every poor child ourselves, but we can refuse to quietly accept a system that allows Jesus to sit in an overcrowded schoolroom with no textbooks. We will not abide unjust tax structures or the gap between the rich and poor that is larger than at any time in our nation’s history. We will not be satisfied when our own families have health insurance but the “Jesuses” who clean our homes do not. Do we love the people God loves? In other words, do we love Jesus?

The test question on sorting day won’t simply be, “What did you believe?” It will also be, “Did you **live** what you believe?” Jesus says he will sort, not on what we’ve claimed to believe, but on how those beliefs translated into what we did. Rule 53 of the Rule of St. Benedict, taken from Matthew’s gospel says, “Receive all visitors as Christ.” Benedictine meditation and prayer, their worship and labor, their open door policy – what they believe and what they do are woven inextricably together. Their motto “*ora et labora*” – “pray and work” holds together the essentials: the need both to know Jesus and to love him in the flesh and blood of his creation.

We cannot say we believe in Jesus if our lives are not expansive toward the hurting. We cannot say we believe in Jesus if our current economic anxieties are fixated only on our 401ks and not on how minimum wage earners will eat. At the end of history God will ask, “What did you do?” Not what did you think or feel or say. The primary evidence of our belief is what we do – for the least of these.

VIII. MARY GLOVER

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners has spent his life trying to get the church to wake up to our obligations to the lowest and the least. He writes of a long-ago experience in our nation’s capital. “I’ll never forget one day when I came back to D.C., my hometown. It was during the Reagan administration and there were the headlines in the newspaper saying that Ed Meese, the highest-ranking legal officer in my country, had just held a press conference and proclaimed from the White House pulpit that there were no hungry people in America.

The next day was Saturday and the food line formed early outside the Sojourners Neighborhood Center, our little community, just one-and-a-half miles from the White House – three hundred families standing in line at our food bank to receive a bag of groceries critical to getting them through the week. Just before the doors are opened and all the people come in, all those who help prepare and serve the food join hands and say a prayer. The prayer is often offered by Mary Glover. She is our best pray-er, a sixty-year-old black woman who knows what it means to be poor and knows how to pray. She prays like someone who knows to whom she is talking – she’s been carrying on a conversation with her Lord for many, many years. She first thanks God for another day, “Another day to serve you, Lord,” she says. Wallis concludes, “On that day I’ll never forget, she prayed these words, “Lord, we know that you’ll be coming through this line today so, Lord, help us to treat you well.”ⁱⁱ

I close with an assignment, a task – try it just for this week... and then the next... and then the next. Make Mary Glover’s food-bank prayer **your** every-morning prayer – “Lord, I know I am going to see a lot of you today, help me to treat you well.” And then, be it a struggling soul in the village, someone at the desk next to you at work, the person who mows your lawn, whoever it is... receive them as Christ.

Amen and Amen.

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 133-134.

²Jim Wallis, *Let Justice Roll*, Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1990.