

“Surprise!”

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Matthew 25:31-46

“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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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, 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.’

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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

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.’

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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.’

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?’

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.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Do you remember the Sermon on the Mount? Those three chapters in Matthew’s gospel account that begin with the beatitudes? Blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or are persecuted for righteousness sake, blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are you when people abused you because of your faith.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew strings together a number of teachings to mark the beginning of Jesus’s ministry as he describes it. Remember gospels are not histories or biographies. Each gospel writer tells about Jesus in the way that best supports his purpose. Matthew’s pattern includes lessons that are grouped together at the beginning and at the end of Jesus’ ministry, rather like bookends. The Sermon on the Mount begins his account while today’s lesson is the final piece in the ending bookend, marking the end of Jesus’ preaching and teaching.

This second bookend is as Jesus answers the disciples’ question, “When will the end come? How can we know?” Jesus answers with one lesson after another. And before you open to Matthew 24 to find the answer yourself, Jesus’ answers are contradictory. He says both, “You can tell by...” and “It will happen without warning.” Finally, Matthew wraps up these lessons with our text about sheep and goats. Sheep and goats don’t really work for us. How many of you have herded

sheep? But talking about left is condemned and right is blessed doesn't really work either. I've known plenty of creative, caring lefties. Let's stick with sheep, shall we?

Again we hear that those who have done God's bidding are blessed. But who exactly are these sheep who are blessed?

First, we remind ourselves that throughout Jesus' ministry, he has set an example for everyone to follow— as he announced the presence of God's kin-dom while healing the sick, welcoming the outcasts and providing food for the hungry. All the while, he has called for his disciples to do the same. He has explained what righteousness looks like and has insisted on a righteousness that goes beyond what the religious leaders practice. He has rejected people's "Lord, Lord" when they are not living as he says. He has offered a parable of two sons, one who promises to do as he's asked but does not follow through, the other who refuses but goes and does it anyway. Matthew's Jesus is all about doing as Jesus says.

So coming back to the question: who are the blessed ones? They're the people who have shown their faithfulness through acts of lovingkindness. They're blessed because they know a Lord who brings peace, attends to those in need and hears the cries of the oppressed. In God's kin-dom, no one is hungry, sick, naked or alone.

The scene opens with the Son of Man as king. All the nations are assembled. And the people are judged, based on how they responded to the ones who are most in need.

I get excited when I read this passage. It seems I've been into justice all my adult life – for the poor and the oppressed and the earth. I speak out. I go on mission trips. I give to UMCOR – United Methodist Committee on Relief. I garden organically and buy local food when I can. I was excited when I learned that we had to take an ethics class in seminary. I thought this is right up my alley. Yet our lesson today is not about ethics. It's not about doing the right thing because it's the right thing. This stops me in my tracks. All my life, I've been conscious of my responsibility to extend caring. But did I do it for the right reasons?

You see, this parable is about mercy. It's about responding "the least of these" simply because they are in need. We are all expected to offer mercy. It's not optional.

Have you ever noticed that while people are being judged based upon their mercy, nothing at all is said about what they believe or what church they go to? This judgement isn't about how well they kept the 10 Commandments or whether they read the bible morning and night. Mercy is the only criterion!

The king speaks to the righteous who have given him food, drink, hospitality, care, and visited him when he was in need. The king's address to the other ones goes through the same list but in the negative. And they all ask: "Lord, when did we see you hungry...?" The same questions but with significantly different meanings.

In the AME, people lived by patronage system. Giving gifts and being indebted were primary means of arranging relationships. Making gifts to those at the fringe of society who couldn't repay was considered foolish. The sheep had been ignoring the social code of their day by offering mercy. The goats were still living by this code. For them, "When did we see you hungry...?" is saying that if they'd only known the king was among the least ones, they'd have done differently.

Sometimes we might be tempted to try to figure out which people are the ones the king is with.

Out of all the people who are in need, which ones are the least ones? Which ones are the ones Christ is with? How can I make sure my limited resources – time, money, and energy – count? The problem with this thinking is that when we do this, we are acting like goats. Goats complicate things by letting their judgment as to whom they should serve drown out the cry of the ones in need.

Sheep act out of true compassion, unaware that the king is present. They don't think about this. They see need and they responded.

No matter who the least ones are, we need to be motivated by an inner drive to offer mercy. To help others for any other reason is to fail to follow Jesus' lead.

Within the Methodist tradition, we understand mercy as both compassion and justice. Compassion is meeting the immediate needs of the ones around us. It's working individually to comfort someone or to give them a meal. Justice is what we do together to address the systems that have led to people needing our compassion. It's compassion to give somebody a drink of water. It's justice to build wells and to make sure people have access to water. It's compassion to visit someone in prison. It's justice to ask whether imprisonment is the best way to promote safety and to prevent recidivism.

As Christ-followers and as United Methodists, we are to practice both justice and compassion.

One thing that really stands out in this story is that both the sheep and the goats express the same surprise. The goats don't see themselves as goats. The sheep are just as surprised. They didn't know...

NT scholar Judy Stack-Nelson suggests an explanation. In Matthew's gospel, following Jesus means following his commands for ethical behavior. This ethical behavior doesn't come from trying hard though. It comes from being that follower. Matthew uses the illustration that good fruit comes from good trees. Jesus teaches that good trees cannot bear bad fruit, nor bad trees good fruit (7:17-18). Trees are known by their fruit (12:33).

We learn mercy as we grow in Christ. We practice following, we worship together. Our caring muscles grow the more we use them – first, as we accept how much God cares for us, then as we practice caring. The more we practice compassion and justice, the more mercy we have to offer. Mission and ministry in the church become movement toward God because as we the body of Christ go into the world's suffering, we find Christ already there waiting for us.

Jesus does not teach that disciples should become salt of the earth or the light of the world. He tells us we already are. Today we're reminded that we need to let our light shine before others so that everyone may find God's light reflected in us.

Practice justice and compassion. Show mercy.

Amen.