

“Exercising Empathy”
Matthew 25:31-40
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Hear these words from Matthew 25:31-40: “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 them from each other 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 who 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 brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

This morning, I read this passage in light of our community’s fourth value: “We will welcome the stranger, including immigrants and refugees, as our Scriptures instruct. We will explore how to support their causes and advocate for justice, remembering that many of us are the children of immigrants and refugees.” I have to be transparent that the beginning of this passage from Matthew doesn’t immediately sit well with me. The part about Jesus separating the sheep from the goats, the “good” from the “bad”. Maybe it’s because I grew up learning a Gospel that involved being a sinner in need of Jesus as savior, and part of securing my spot in the afterlife with him involved doing good deeds with the right heart while here on earth. It was a way of understanding faith and salvation that treated the Divine more like Santa Claus – an all-seeing entity with a naughty and nice list and everything was centered on my actions, my salvation as an individual and the goal was to make it on that nice list. In turn, doing good deeds for those most in need, became less about moving towards communal flourishing and more of a race to do the most good and in the process, save the most souls. Then, when I got to heaven, Jesus would greet me to say, “Well done, good and faithful servant”, and then I could receive my blessings, stroll through the pearly gates and finally, be at peace. But when I recount how I used to understand the way of Jesus, it takes me down a path that makes serving others about myself. So, those in need, the ones that Jesus is a proxy for in this passage become mere pawns in my plan to climb the spiritual ladder. It twists my empathy into a strategy to assure my own safety. It is the worst of capitalism and white supremacy wrapped in a package of charity and tied with a glittery, religious bow. And that theology is a far cry from the one I now hold as truth, so when I read this passage, I feel the residue from that old message sticking to me and I want to just wipe it away.

But, I have to wonder, is there something else going on with this passage? Something deeper than Jesus dividing “good” individuals from “bad”? According to Wilda Gafney in her Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church, there is. In it, she explains that despite the dominant teachings of the West, which emphasizes individual salvation, the Hebrew understanding of the term is much more communal, intertwined with the lives and choices of the collective. She goes on to say that this is how Jesus would have communicated his message and his audience would have understood the message being for “us”, not “I”. She then raises the question, “Imagine if your salvation was dependent upon the actions of your community?” Friends, let us sit for a moment with this question. What if your own salvation depended on the person sitting to the left of you, to the right of you, the person behind you and the person in front of you? What if the salvation of those people depended on you and others in this space?

Now, take that a step further. Imagine if your ability to thrive was dependent upon the person experiencing homelessness or the single Mom dependent upon government aid to make ends meet for her family. And imagine if their ability to thrive, not just physically, but in every sense was dependent on you? What might that look like or feel like?

Okay, now go even one step further. Consider what it might be like if the flourishing of refugees at the border, families making dangerous, desperate attempts to get across to give their kids and themselves more opportunity. The kids who were locked in cages and the people suffering as grueling temperatures rise, what if their lives were dependent on you? On us? And can we even try to understand what it would mean if our lives were dependent on them? Or perhaps what if we our abundance was interdependent upon those in the prison system? Those bodies and souls that are known more for their misdeeds and referred to as a number rather than a whole human with a name and a story?

As we allow ourselves to venture into such possibilities, to visualize a world that is intimately dependent on others, an interconnected web of creation...I wonder how much quicker we might be to lend a hand or offer help if we understood it to be this way. How radically might our goals, our decision-making processes change if we knew deep down and understood wholeheartedly that there is more than enough for everyone when each of us has what we need.

I have a friend who is a hospital chaplain, working closely with those transitioning to end of life. When he talks about this, he often points out those who are dying alone. Those who don’t have family or friends visiting them, the folks whose rooms aren’t filled with cards and balloons and flowers. What my friend tells me is more times than not, those people who are alone talk about how they regret their decisions earlier in life. Decisions to neglect family and loved ones and choose instead to accumulate as much wealth as possible. Decisions to hold grudges or treat people poorly or unjustly. And now, at the end of their life, they have brought about their lonely departure by spending their lives isolating themselves from others in the name of greed or pride. I can’t help but think that maybe this is what Jesus was getting at. In the separation of sheep and goats, perhaps there was symbolism of those moving toward common good and those moving toward individual advancement. By choosing to not consider the entirety of creation, particularly those who are discarded and marginalized, the people represented by the goats bring about their

own separation. Maybe it's less about Jesus choosing between good and bad individuals and more about individuals choosing themselves over community.

I wonder which we're choosing here at Seattle First? In our own transitions and decisions about a new pastor, about our building, about programming – are we making choices that down the road will be a bigger benefit to a broader pool of people? Or are we choosing based on what feels good to us right now? How are the choices we're making going to benefit those most in need? Are there areas where we are choosing our individual comfort over the collective flourishing of God's creation? My prayer for us is that we would see our bigger role in our neighborhood, in our region, in the kin-dom of God and be spurred to make choices now that will enable us in the long run to reach further and wider, to embrace, to welcome strangers and refugees, those at the margins. That we would continually ask ourselves who is missing from the table at SFBC? Who cannot even access the table? And what do we need to do to rectify that so that when we say all are welcome, we are authentically leaning into that and living it out? At one time or another, each of us needed to be welcomed in. May we be a community who remembers that often, who continually reaches out, welcomes in, and who exercises empathy by choosing “we” over “me”. May it be so. Amen.

Benediction

For our benediction this morning, I'd like to offer a poem called, “The Perfect World” and it was written by a young refugee named Bessam Mohammad.

*A world where there is peace and calm,
A world where everyone has a dream.
A world where our dreams become real,
A world where no one suffers from hunger;
A world where there aren't any borders,
A world where our planet is green and clean.*

May this be the world we strive toward, and it may it so for all of creation. Amen.