

“The Danger of Drawing Lines”
Matthew 25:31-46
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all the angels, then will he sit on the throne of his glory. And gathered before him will be all the nations and he will separate them one from another just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will put the sheep on his right and the goats at the left. Then shall the one who rules say to those at his right, ‘Come, those blessed by my Father; inherit the realm prepared for you all from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you all gave me food; I was thirsty and you all gave me drink; a stranger and you all gathered me in. Naked and you all clothed me; I was sick and you all cared for me; in prison and you all visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer asking, ‘Majesty, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and gather you in, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the one who rules will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you all, as much as you did for one of the least of these my kindred, you all did it to me.’

“Then the one who rules will say to those on the left, ‘Go from me, all you who are accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you all gave me no food; I was thirsty and you all gave me no drink; a stranger and you all did not gather me in, naked and you all did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you all did not care for me.’ Then they also will answer, asking, “Majesty, 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 the ruler will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you all, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you all did not do it for me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Sermon

This is a hard one. A challenging passage, for sure. Are we to read it as a message about how to behave as Christians: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick? Or are we to read it as a warning to those who would like to do right: here are all the things you have to do as an individual in order to go to heaven? Are we to read it as a text of judgement, a rather threatening vision of Christ as the King who decides the fate of all the nations of the world? Are we to read ourselves into this story, projecting ourselves onto the righteous sheep who gain eternal life, feeling superior to those poor goats who are damned? We could probably fit all of these readings, and more, into conversations about this parable that Jesus tells.

As for me, I find this a bit harsh. When I think about the phrase, “whatever you have done to the least of these my children, you have done to me,” I feel convicted in my beliefs that God cares especially for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. But when I think about the sheep and goats, all I can hear is a song from the band Cake: “Sheep go to heaven, goats go to hell.”

Those poor animals. Wandered too far from the farm, I guess.

It is so deeply uncomfortable to think about Jesus as gathering all the nations of the world and then judging some of them into eternal torment. That’s not the Jesus we know, right? That’s not the kind, gentle, generous Jesus. That’s not the encouraging teacher Jesus, patiently answering questions from inane to profound. That’s not the suffering servant Jesus, resigning himself to his fate, or perhaps choosing to sacrifice his life so that sinners would be saved.

But I think all too often, Christians, perhaps especially Christians, leave out the parts of Jesus stories that show anger, even rage; that call out exploitative practices by people in power; that lose patience and lack understanding; that pronounce judgment. Those are parts of Jesus as well.

But drawing lines is so hard. It is dangerous, actually. The binary thinking of good/evil, white/black, rich/poor, deserving/undeserving, beautiful/ugly, friend/foe...those patterns of thinking get us into trouble all the time. I’m not saying we should not use our commonsense judgement in our daily lives, but drawing lines based on stark binaries is rarely the wisest thing to do.

Lutheran pastor and professor David Lose writes this in a commentary on this passage: “I’ve often quoted the theological maxim that “whenever you draw a line between who’s in and who’s out, you find Jesus on the other side.” I find that comforting when I think about how inclusive and expansive God’s profound love is. I find it uncomfortable when I imagine that includes those whose views I find troubling or even threatening (conveniently forgetting that they may find my convictions equally foreign).”

Isn’t that just so frustrating? God is profoundly loving and inclusive...and that means She loves the people that we can’t tolerate, the people who do harm, the people who enable and do violence. But let us also remember that loving does not mean allowing or tolerating damaging behaviors—I like to think of God calling all the people who do harm into account, so that they would change their ways.

But this parable doesn’t tell us many details about what exactly eternal punishment or eternal life look like. And it is that lack of illustration that furthers interpretations about judgement to hold sway.

Rev. Dr. Wilda C. Gafney, our upcoming Romney speaker and author of the lectionary that we have been using for a couple years now, points out in her commentary on this passage that in the original Greek, this text uses the plural “you” throughout this passage. So, if we are tempted to use the actions Jesus names as a checklist of how to be good, we’re kind of missing the point. The actions that lead to salvation are a community effort: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned...those are not up to one person, they are the task of a community that cares for one another.

Dr. Gafney then asks, “what might it mean for our individual salvation to be dependent on the judgment of our community, our nation, rather than our own or our individual faith as so often preached in the Protestant tradition? Faith and its profession are not salvific here, rather it is the work of the gospel, the work that Christ did with and for ‘the least of these’ that is salvific.”

Over the summer, Vanessa preached on this text in relation to our church value about welcome and inclusion, and I encourage you to look back and find that sermon on our church website. She illustrated beautifully the challenge of being in community and training ourselves to see each other as bearers of our salvation. She called us to ask ourselves how our lives would be different if we took Jesus seriously and identified him with a person we normally look past on the street, or someone we despise. What would we do, church?

In preparation for preaching, I often look to Ernesto Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname* to learn from Nicaraguan campesinos what they found in the text. And their interpretations resonate with Gafney.

Alejandro: “...the identification is very clear. ‘What you did with these...these are me.’ we’re always believing that Jesus Christ is a distant person, different from the people. And it seems to me very important, as it’s been important to me for a long time: that even if a person is a snob, that person is God, no matter who. God identifies himself with human beings; God makes no distinction. And that’s what makes revolutionary love spring up.”

Natalia: “God identifies with the needy. With the poor. With the humble.”

Alejandro: “With everybody that’s screwed.”

Fr. Cardenal: “I was saying before that that Son of Man would be a collective Christ, a society; and now I’m surer of it because of what Alejandro has said: Christ is the society of the poor, the proletariat, as we say today. And this people is the one that’s going to judge.”

Our judgement, our fate, dependent on our community. What do we make of that?

How, then, shall we live?

It is interesting to me that the nations being judged, whether they were found righteous sheep or wrongdoing goats, were all surprised by the judgement of the king. The ones who were praised were praised for doing kind and just actions, but they had no idea to identify those they helped with the ruler! They didn’t know the identity of who they served, they just served! And likewise for the ones who were reprimanded: they didn’t know who they neglected to care for! They must have been wondering, “what did we miss?!”

Again, pastor David Lose, writes that what is clear is that “the promise that God regularly shows up in those places and persons we least expect God to be. Both groups, remember, gave next to no thought to their treatment of “the least of these” and are surprised to discover that their actions (or lack of action) matter simply because it never crossed their mind that God was

present. They gave next to no thought to their behavior or disposition toward “the least of these” because those persons just did not matter. And so along these lines, another way to think about “the least of these” is “those of no account,” “those who do not matter,” “those to whom we give little thought,” perhaps even “those whom we disdain.””

As you take in this reframing of definitions about “the least of these,” a phrase which rings problematic to some, remember not just to think of “the least of these” as the people for whom you give little thought, the people who you disdain, the people who you choose not to associate with. Jesus intentionally tells this parable about “the nations.” So, when we are reframing this phrase, ask this: who are the ones to whom this nation pays little attention, those who are given no account, those who do not matter or those who are disdained by the words, actions and policies of this nation?

The campesinos with whom Fr. Cardenal conversed had this to say:

Alejandro: “There’s the danger that the things that Christ names here will be understood as simple traditional charity, and I don’t think that’s the meaning.”

Gigi, our friend from Peru: “at times in an unjust system there’s been no alternative to that traditional charity. It’s clear that authentic Christian charity is collectivized charity: a whole system where injustice no longer exists. Both of them are charity, but the latter is already the beginning of the kingdom.”

Fr. Cardenal “Camilo Torres used to say that revolution is effective charity.”

Alejandro: “Let’s make no mistake about that: there are religious people who think they are good people because they give aid, alms, old shoes. That’s not what Christ demands in this Gospel; it’s a total change in the social system.”

William: “Christ speaks of visiting the sick; that’s the only thing you could do at that time. Now he would have talked of clinics, free medical service, hygienic conditions, preventative medicine.”

Elvis: “if religion helps me to help my neighbor, then it’s useful. If it makes me ignore my neighbor’s needs, it’s of no use.”

The wisdom we gain from the campesinos, who may well be some of who we picture when thinking of “the least of these,” is clear: Jesus told this parable to prompt a system-wide change, from placing the onus for neighbor care on individual charity to meeting people’s needs to the fullest extent of a system’s capability.

Collective responsibility, not individual responsibility. Perhaps that is the answer to the surprised sheep and the stupefied goats asking what they missed. What did you miss? You missed that all of you are on the hook for the wellbeing of the ones in need. You missed that the Holy One identified with the ones pushed to the bottom of the social ladder. You missed that we are our brother’s and sister’s and sibling’s keeper...we are supposed to watch out for each other and serve each other as we are capable.

Communal salvation was the concern of Jesus and his community...likely because they longed for salvation on multiple levels: spiritual salvation, but also material salvation that would liberate them from life under Roman empirical rule. And communal salvation should be our concern today. It's been many decades since civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer uttered these words, but they are no less true in 2023: "Nobody's free until everybody's free."

Liberation thinking, liberation theology, necessitates that the lines that society draws be wiped out, be erased. There is no "us" and "them," no "good" and "bad," no "worthy of homes" and "unworthy of homes," no "they deserve to be free" and "they have reneged on the social contract and should be incarcerated." Liberation for one is liberation for all, and Jesus proclaimed that he identified with those who are living, as Howard Thurman would say, with their backs up against the wall. And so those of us who have more freedoms, more privileges, need to recognize our liberation bound up with theirs, and take our erasers to those fake lines that are meant to divide and conquer us.

Friends, the question prompted by this parable is not: am I a sheep or am I a goat? It is closer to: are WE sheep or are WE goats? Or maybe: is the United States of America a sheep or a goat? And even closer still to "why do we even have lines backed up by power in our society, and how can I participate in undoing them?"

Beloved church, we are in this work of collective liberation together.

We are in this together when we support those experiencing loss or illness by organizing food deliveries for them.

We are in this together when we open spaces where people who are living on the margins can meet and support each other.

We are in this together when we honestly look at ourselves and reflect on the behaviors and words that have caused harm, and we dedicate ourselves to trying to do better.

We are in this together when we care for children, visit the elderly, and advocate for policies that would enhance the lives of these vulnerable among us.

We are doing the work of collective liberation when we call on banks to stop funding fossil fuel extraction, when we use the power of our voice and our vote to advocate for housing for all, when we craft spaces where people who identify as LGBTQIA+ can live fully and vibrantly and openly, when we listen to the artists and the poets and the musicians who bring beauty into the world that can help us go on one more day, one more week, one more month...we are doing the work of collective liberation when we remind each other we are not alone, that we do not exist in a binary, that individualism is a lie.

Beloved church, let us go forth from this place knowing ourselves not as sheep or goats, but as followers of the Way of Jesus who find ways to erase those lines and break down the walls that divide us, helping each other find a way forward rooted in bringing all of Creation to freedom.

May it ever be so. Amen.