

“There will be a Day” Matthew 25:31-46

This morning, we arrive at the finishing touch of Jesus’ final teaching two days before his crucifixion: The parable of “The Sheep and the Goats.” In this short story, Jesus gives his disciples a particular lesson for that day, a lesson true of life that is merely a succession of days and years, a weary clock ticking until death arrives; then, it doesn’t require much attention. But what if life here on earth is a prelude to judgment? What if every word we utter, every thought that darts through our brains, every action we have taken or not taken, and every attitude we strike is to be examined and judged? What if it were today when we face judgment for those who have ignored the needs of Christ’s brothers? We might pay closer attention when we realize there will come an instant significance when this life is over.

The parable, in the usual sense, is not a homespun story emerging from the ordinary activities of life. No, it is a description of a cosmic event at the climax of history, 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, and all the nations will gather before him, and he will metaphorically separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” Wow! It’s an incredible vision with all the angels—all the nations. It’s almost like a scene out of the newspaper’s comic section. This is quite a gathering where the world will be judged. That is where history is headed. Friends, that is where you and I are headed. This earthly life is a serious business. Our choices and actions, big and small, have an eternal weight. Our everyday life is packed with ultimate responsibility as a prelude to eternity.

Throughout the history of Christianity, scholars have wrestled with this passage. From my study of the passage, I found only one writer honest enough to say he was uncertain about the authentic interpretation, only to do his best. I respect that person for his honesty, and I want to be honest, not to speculate, but to share what appears to be a clear image of that day. Before I dive in, let us take a moment for prayer.

Gracious God, we offer you our gratitude and praise in this season of harvest and thanksgiving. We thank you and give you our hearts for all you have given us. Speak to us now, that we may hear your Word and become alive in your Word by the Spirit of Christ living in us. Amen.

As we come together each Sunday morning, we affirm in the church’s most essential creed that Jesus, the King, will be the final judge. “I believe in Jesus Christ who shall come again to judge the living and the dead.” The judgment is not a courtroom scene where there is no testimony given, no witnesses, and no questions: did you do this or that? All is already known. All is already decided, and here comes the sentence, and a great separation occurs. But why are these people on the right invited to the Kingdom party? How did they get tickets? The answer is simple yet disturbing. “You see, I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you showed me hospitality. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.

There is a problem for those schooled in the great theme of the reformation of faith alone. On this final judgment day that Jesus pictures for us, it appears that works get us into the sheep line on the right. However, our work is action, not words. It’s what you did, not what you believed, how you acted, not what you confessed. Every time the judgment day is mentioned in the Bible, it appears that works are the decisive criteria for a chance to be on the right. But hold

on. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but whoever does the will of my Father in heaven."

The Apostle Paul says, "All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive the reward for what has been done" (1 Cor. 5:10). The truth is that the Bible tells us that we are saved by grace through faith, but judged by works. If God's grace and mercy do not penetrate our hearts so that it results in gracious and merciful behavior, it will, in the end, only condemn us. Grace that does not flow into loving action stinks to high heaven. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-10, "for by grace you have been saved, through faith, created in Jesus Christ for good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." My friends, on that day when the books are opened, the issue will not be what you believed but how that faith transformed your life and behavior and inspired your love. James, the brother of Jesus, put it this way. "Faith without works is dead." What counts in the end is a grace that works its way into loving action.

The translation in our text has Jesus saying, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." I cannot imagine Jesus identifying with and calling us to love and care only for those who confess as certified Christians. Do we ask for their baptismal certificate? Do we call upon people to hear their testimony to ensure they are saved? The Apostle Paul says mercy begins in the household of faith but does not end there. The things Jesus commends are so basic, so simple. Little ministries, not big miracles. It is not healing the sick but *caring* for them. It is not liberating the prisoners but *visiting* them.

Indeed, we should work on reforming the world's injustices, but Jesus never lets us take our eyes off the individual. Someone needy, maybe an irritating, possibly underserving person right in front of us, because in that one person, someone might be experiencing a rough time. The things that count when the Kingdom books are opened are the little ministries where the mystery of eternal salvation by God's grace is revealed. Foster parents, jail visitors, and soup kitchen volunteers. People who stick up for the defenseless, the unborn, the disabled. Those who listen to women who have had abortions. Those who accompany people with addictions to a support group. Those who bring a casserole dish to a grieving family. Maybe those who visit older people, a neighbor, or serve as a hospice caregiver. It is not easy.

I recently read a story about Francis Assisi. Francis was a wealthy, careless man before his conversion. One day, he was out riding and saw a loathsome leper. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around the leper. When he did, the face of the leper changed to the face of Jesus Christ. That is a simple example but by no means an easy rule by which to live. What if every person you meet, especially the ones whom you tend to regard as the least important, the most irritating, the least deserving, you say, "Jesus, it's you again." We all have direct access to Jesus through someone in need. During the 13th century, Francis became the leader of the movement of evangelical poverty, devoted to the human Jesus and his desire to follow Jesus' example.

In this parable, there is another surprising feature of the judgment scene. There is no mention of sin, at least in the way we would expect. I think we all hold some thought that sin is the judgment we are mostly afraid of. Right? Jesus will drag out all our sins, all those things for which we are so ashamed and want to hide. But he doesn't. All Jesus talks about is how the "blessed" served him through simple acts of love and kindness. Why is that? Sin is not the issue on the day of judgment because all sin has been forgiven on the cross.

The whole sin problem was taken care of at the cross. All debts were canceled. However, that does not let us off the hook to confess our sins, but the basis of this final judgment is that sin is already forgiven. What matters is what you and I do now that we have been set free from all our sins by the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who will one day be our judge. Well, that is not entirely true. A certain kind of sin shows up at the last judgment. We can see what Jesus says by looking at those who stand to the judge's left, those who are thrown into the outer darkness. Why are they condemned? There is no mention of some great sin—murder, lying, adultery, even gossip. Amazingly, those in the goat line are not charged for what they did but for what they did not do.

Many of us have learned there are two areas of sin. One of commission and the other of omission. “Forgive us for what we have done and for what we have left undone.” **What counts in the end is not the wrong we do but the right we fail to do (let me repeat).** To me, that is a stunning thought. I know that Christ has liberated me from the power of sin that can ruin my life and the lives of others around me. It seems to me the biggest reason to avoid sin is because sin offends God. Sin is stupid, self-destructive, and causes untold pain all around. I do not run away from sin because it is unforgivable but because it is destructive.

The most unnoticed and problematic sin in our lives is not what we do but what we fail to do. We guard our self-centered existence and protect our time and our stuff so well that we fail to see Jesus in his disguise. If you have come to know me by now and my attraction to lyrics in music, speaking the truth of life. There is a song by Trevor Morgan entitled “Jesus Rides the Subway.” Listen as I read a portion of the lyrics. “Jesus strolls the sidewalks on the wrong side of the tracks. Yeah, Jesus strolls the sidewalks that poverty attacks. He makes his home among the shadows where the fatherless have fallen through the cracks. Yeah, Jesus strolls the sidewalks while the righteous turn their backs.”

So often, we fail to see Jesus when we are careless of the basic needs of people around us. We fail to see Jesus in the stranger on the street, on a seat next to us, the grumpy older man next door, or the refugee in town. Jesus is everywhere.

Here is something vitally important to remember. People who live out the gospel in love do not do it to get brownie points with God. As Jesus so colorfully put it, “Don’t let your right hand know what your left hand is doing.” We do not need brownie points with God because we are already accepted, already forgiven. Whatever we do in response is free, not calculated.

If you have ever met a self-conscious, self-righteous do-gooder, you would soon understand why most needy people would rather go hungry than take a piece of their necessary bread. This is not the land of the law but the land of the gospel. I suppose the others on the left are surprised because they thought they were in. They did their religious duties, went to church and Sunday school, tithed, and were seen at the community prayer breakfast, maybe even gave a sermon or two. Lives that would never hint at scandal, and no one would dream of calling them sinners. But here is what Jesus sees when we ask. “When did we see you? Lord, if we knew it was you, we would have helped.”

In closing, as the praise team prepares to lead us in the final chorus of Hymn of Heaven, surprising as this all seems, there is nothing new here, folks. Nothing has changed. The Bible is clear, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Now we know what believing truly means. It does not mean we accept a set of doctrines, go through religious rituals, or “make a

decision for Christ.” It means, as Jesus often said, that we follow him. And following him means we will meet his brothers and sisters in the least of these.

Following him means we live a life of unconscious awareness of self-giving love, as he did. There is nothing new here. It is the same old gospel: faith working itself out of love. In the end, there will be a day when all will come and stand before him, and when we do, I pray that through our faith and the grace of our Lord and Savior, we will see each other standing on the right side of Jesus.

**So let it be today we shout the hymn of Heaven.
With angels and the saints, we raise a mighty roar.
Glory to our God who gave us life beyond the grave
Holy, holy is the Lord**

**Holy, holy is the Lord
Holy, holy is the Lord
Amen.**