

Where to Find Him

A Sermon on Matthew 25: 31-46 by Rich Holmes

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Some years ago, a friend of mine had a brother who was a pastor in a church in some other denomination—and one day, this pastor, went with a team of other church people on a mission trip. Well, on this mission trip, he went to a village in an impoverished and underdeveloped part of Africa. In this village he helped to construct a church and dig a well, and he organized a sort of Vacation Bible School for the village children of whom there were dozens. Well, finally he came back from the mission trip, he preached a sermon about that experience to his congregation. In this sermon, he became rather emotional as he told all about his trip, and as tears welled up in his eyes, he told his congregation that he could see the face of Christ in the faces of each and every one of the children in this African village.

Now, on his way out of the church that Sunday, this pastor was shaking hands with all the people in the church, you know the routine, and a number of people complimented this man about his sermon. One person even said “May I have a copy of that sermon.”

“Of course” the pastor said; and he handed him a copy.

Well, two weeks went by, and a letter came in the mail. It was in fact a certified letter from the governing board of this church’s denomination. Whether it was a synod, or Presbytery or conference, I don’t know. But it was a letter from this governing body telling him that they had a copy of this sermon about his trip to Africa. They saw in the sermon where he said that he saw the face of Christ in the face of each child in this African village. The pastor was required to appear before this governing body in thirty days and tell them if he really believed that. Did he really see the face of Christ in the face of each child in this village?

Thirty days later, the pastor was in front of the governing board. “Yes”, he said, “I really did see the face of Christ in the children of this village.” So the governing board then decided that this man would be stripped of his ordination, and forbidden to preach in any more churches in this denomination, on the grounds, that in their view, he was a pantheist. Now, you may not know what a pantheism is, and you probably don’t care to hear a long theological discourse about what pantheism is, so let me make this as brief as possible. A pantheist, to put it in simple terms, is someone who doesn’t just believe that God is *in* the created world, they believe that God is the created world—and that is heresy. So, this governing board was accusing this pastor of heresy, because in their view he was saying that Christ was not just in the face of each of these village children, he was saying each of these children is Christ.

Now, I think every one of us here probably knows that there was something really terrible about what this church did to this poor, obviously very compassionate man. But what was it? Is heresy something that Christians should care about? Of course it is. Is the worship of creation instead of creator something that Christians should care about? You better believe it is. And while this board’s actions may have seemed cruel and heartless to this pastor, I will give this board the benefit of the doubt. I am sure they took no joy in stripping this man of his ordination. I am sure they took no pleasure in their action. So what did they do that was so wrong? What made their actions so terrible?

If you have been in the church for long, you have surely heard this story from the gospels that Jesus tells us today. Jesus tells us that when the Son of Man comes in his glory with all his angels and he sits on his throne with all the nations gathered before him, he will separate the sheep from the goats. After this, he will turn to the sheep and say “Come you who are blessed

by my father, and inherit the kingdom that is 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 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.”

But the sheep, the righteous will be surprised at all this. They have no memory of ever having done these things for Jesus. Feeding him when he was hungry, or giving him a drink when he was thirsty, taking care of him when he was sick or visiting him when he was in prison. “Surely we did these things for others, but when did we do these things for you?” they say. But the Lord will say to them “Whenever you did these things for the least of these you did them for me.”

But that, of course, is not the end of the story. For the Lord will also turn to those who are the goats, those he separated from the righteous sheep and he will say to them “Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you gave me no clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” And we are told that the unrighteous, these wicked goats, will be just as surprised as the sheep as they will say “When, Lord, when was it that we did not do all these things?” But the Lord will reply “Whenever you did not do this for the least of these you did not do them for me. We know this story, or at least most of us do. And when you hear this story and take Jesus at his word, then of course there can be no doubt that this church board made a serious mistake in punishing this poor man, my friend’s brother. All this man said is that he saw Christ in the face of these village children, and that sounds pretty similar to what Jesus says in this story. But maybe after hearing this story

you say to yourself “Does Jesus really mean what he says? Does Jesus really mean that he is anyone who is among the least of these. Should we believe Jesus mean what he says or is he only speaking in a metaphorical or in a playful sort of way?”

When Jesus walked the earth as you read the gospels, you learn there were all kinds of amazing things he did that showed everyone he was God. He walked on water, he turned water into wine, he cast out demons, he did all kinds of things that were extraordinary and which showed people he was divine. But of course there were other times when he appeared quite ordinary, even less than ordinary. There were times when of course, he looked like anyone else. One of those times was when he was on trial for his life and he was mocked by the Roman soldiers as they put a crown of thorns on his head and a purple robe on his back because he didn't look like any kind of king. And what is it that we can do with someone who looks just like anyone else? Well, one thing we can do is treat them as if they were Christ himself. But, as you do that, you may ask yourself what happens if we treat that person like they are divine and yet they are not divine. What happens then? That is the kind of question the board asked who stripped that man of his ordination. And the answer is, if you do that it would be bad. You would be treating someone as divine who is not. You would be guilty of this charge of pantheism. But there is another possibility. What happens if you treat them like anyone ordinary and they actually are the Christ? You see that's the kind of question I think the people on that board forgot to ask. And the answer to that question is that would be so much worse.

Are we so sure, are we so sure that the person we serve cupcakes to at the Canton Health Care Center, the person we give warm clothes to in our community Christmas that we sponsor, the person that we feed a warm meal to down at Reedurban, are we so sure that this person is

not our Lord in disguise? What makes us so sure? Are we so sure just because that person doesn't look the way we picture our Lord to look in our mind's eyes? Well, ask yourself this, did Jesus look anything like people imagined the Son of God ought to look when he walked this earth? They laughed at him. They mocked him. It wasn't just that he didn't look the way they pictured the Lord, but he looked like the last person, the very last person you would imagine being the Lord.

You know, last year when I was teaching a Sunday school class on Jesus' crucifixion, I became fascinated with the way Paul talks about our Lord's death on the cross, because he doesn't just say the Lord died for me. He says "I have been crucified with Christ. I am up there on the cross with Christ." That sounds strange on the surface, but it is not such a strange thing to say if you have ever seen someone you love suffer. You know that if you watch someone you love suffer, you experience their suffering as your own. You can say it is as if their suffering is happening to you, but I even think you can take out the "as if". It is happening to you. If you watch someone you love suffer, you also suffer. Well if we are the ones who were crucified with Christ, if we are the ones up there on the cross with Christ, then is it really so hard to imagine that Christ could be the face of anyone who is homeless, or hungry, or anyone who cries out for a warm coat or medical attention, or companionship? Is that so heretical, is that so blasphemous, is that so irreverent?

Well if it is, then what about some of the people in this story that Jesus tells about? The goats that Jesus separated from the sheep. They were also so sure that the hungry people they passed by on the street were just your garden variety hungry people, the sick people they passed by were just your garden variety sick people, the strangers they passed by were just

your garden variety strangers. And they may have considered it blasphemy, heresy, and the height of irreverence to suggest that they were anything other than your garden variety hungry people, sick people and strangers. And weren't they surprised, weren't they surprised when they found out otherwise?

If we decide to treat the least of these as if they are Christ himself then we might be guilty of idolatry, we might be guilty of pantheism, and that, my friends would be bad. But if the least of these are Christ himself, and we neglect him and ignore him, and close our eyes to his suffering, wouldn't that be so much worse. So isn't the safe bet, isn't the best bet to treat everyone as if they are indeed the Lord in disguise. For how do we know they are not? When it's all said and done, how do we really know they are not?

I don't know whatever became of my friend's brother. I don't know if he tried to get ordained in a different church. I don't know if he tried a different career, I don't know anything about how his story ends. But I know how our Lord promises his story will ultimately end, just as I know how the Lord promises all of our stories will ultimately end. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.