

When Do We See?

Matthew 25: 31-46

2020 has been a very strange year. It's funny, because our world of mission started off strangely even before the global pandemic took place. In January, as we prepared for our mission trip to Lebanon, it was thrown off course a bit by the potential of a war with Iran. We were able to make the trip safely, but this was the beginning of a very strange and difficult year both for the church and for our mission in particular. As coronavirus came on our radars, we began having to rearrange or cancel events such as our Hattiesburg mission trip and 2nd Saturdays. It would be easy to have given up and to say, "You know what? We are going to hunker down and just wait until this is over to try to do any good in the world."

Thankfully though, that is not how God works, and it is also not the nature of this congregation. In a season where learning to serve the "least of these" has taken on new meaning, our community of faith has learned to be creative in the face of challenges and to find new avenues of serving. We have asked the questions of our mission partners about their specific needs so that we can serve and donate in ways that are appropriate and helpful in this particular time. Because we know that this season looks different for all of us – for the church and for nonprofits, yes, but also even more importantly for those that we want to walk alongside. There is great need in our community today. People are hungry and thirsty and tired. People are looking for resources and don't know where to turn because of the economic struggles of this time. And people are scared – scared for their health and for the health of their loved ones. It is easy to become isolated out of fear and want to shut ourselves out of awareness of the world around us. What we find in today's passage, as well as in the parables from the past few weeks, is that Christ connects with us in unexpected ways.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This Sunday is the end of our church calendar year, where Christ concludes his teaching to the disciples through three parables. We have heard the first two the past few weeks, learning to be generous and to stay awake and be prepared for any time that we see Christ. Today is the culmination of this teaching, readying us for what we will find once we are no longer in this world. Our version of kings and queens looks a little more like the show *The Crown* than it would have been in Jesus's day. What we know is that Jesus's version of being a king is very different than King Herod's or another king of his time. Jesus is at the same time both a king and a shepherd, showing us that he is here to take care of us, to guide us, and to make sure that we are kept safe. As we end our church year with this scripture of judgment, we know that next week is the beginning of Advent, a season of waiting where we have hope anew for the coming of the Prince of Peace. Jesus in this parable is both the king and the human, the shepherd and one of the sheep. Christ wants us to be in relationship with him, and he wants this relationship to be good.

I have always been a little bit confused by this passage, particularly about the separation of the sheep and the goats. I did a bit of research, and there's not much out there about the history of shepherds separating sheep and goats, but this is what I can gather together. It was very normal for shepherds to have mixed herds with both sheep and goats, and sheep and goats were valued equally as livestock. Shepherds separated them during feeding times, though,

because goats are less picky about their food and eat grass that's higher off the ground. Sheep, though, eat lower to the ground only, so by separating them, the shepherd could make sure that both the sheep and the goats had enough to eat. Furthermore, the word used for "goat" in this passage is the Greek word "*eriphos*," which is more specifically a term for a male kid. Herdsmen would have needed to cull out some of the male baby goats so that they could have a good balance, making sure they had enough females to produce milk. Now, we don't all need to know the specifics of herding necessarily, but I think the context helps us understand this passage a bit better. In this separation, the shepherd makes sure that there is enough for his whole flock to feed and arranges for all of them to be productive and well taken care of. In separating and culling the flock, the shepherd is seeking to promote all that is lifegiving for the whole of the herd.

This seems to be what Jesus is asking the people to do as well. When did you offer a drink? When did you share clothing, or welcome the stranger? God is calling us to help do this shepherding work. In this parable, God models for us not only the importance of caring for one another, but also how to use resources so that we make sure there is enough for everyone. We hear this same story throughout the Bible: God provided enough manna for that particular day, and when the 5,000 were fed, there was food leftover because everyone had enough. This scripture is a reminder that we are not to hoard our resources like toilet paper, waiting for the day we might need them. We are to share and embolden ourselves so that everyone is taken care of. We heard a similar story last week when Chris preached about the parable of the talents. It is no good to take the talent and bury it in the dirt out of fear. We are called to use our resources to multiply and provide for all, embracing generosity and trusting that when we all share and contribute, we all will be provided for.

Jesus calls us to serve the least of these, but he also reminds us that when we serve, we must look at the face of the person that we are serving. All too often, our service is separated from the people we are helping, which can create an "us" and "them" mentality where we are the helpers and they are the helpless. In her book *More Than Enough*, Lee Hull Moses talks about how we often talk about the "least of these" in Matthew 25, but we use generic language that separates and leads to this "us" and "them" way of thinking. She says, "Sometimes that binary division carries the implicit message that we are not just different from 'them' but also superior. We talk about serving 'the hungry,' 'the poor,' 'the needy' in a way that reduces 'the poor' to a faceless, nameless, generic 'other.'" Jesus, in relating himself to the thirsty and hungry and stranger, calls for us to remove this otherization from our way of thinking and instead see one another as people reflecting the face of God. Instead of it being "us" and "them," how can we work towards a mission, a church, and a world where we see a "we"?

Jesus tells us that whenever we serve the least of these, we are serving him. This challenges us to see one another as all as part of the body of Christ. We must work alongside one another for the betterment of all, because our very livelihoods as members of the same body depend on it.

Jesus does not want us to do good works so that we can get to heaven. This idea of works righteousness has been made popular in the past, but we believe that we do good works because we are living out our faith. Faith is the beginning, with our actions multiplying because of it.

Jesus is not just saying that those who do good things get to heaven and those who do not are judged. Noticed this: neither the sheep nor the goats could tell Jesus when they had seen him. This parable is made more complicated because of the parables that proceed it. The sheep did the right things, but they did not have a light ready for the bridegroom and therefore did not see Jesus in the face of others. Jill Duffield wrote in this week's Presbyterian Outlook, "Perhaps this rather low Sunday on the list of liturgical high and holy days offers us a time to pause and be awakened to what is all too often our thoughtless ways of being in this world. We go on autopilot through life, and if we are not nudged or pushed to pay attention to not only our actions but the presence of those around us, we may well end up being shocked at where Christ puts us when he comes to judge the nations."

We have to pay attention to our surroundings and work to see God in our everyday interactions. Our relationship with God and with one another is complicated, and there is no one track or one right answer. What we do know is that we are meant to look for God everywhere we are, seeing God in the faces of those around us, as well as in ourselves. Our challenge is this: to see Christ in all we do and in all with whom we work, and to share our resources so that all will have enough. When we do this, we can serve one another out of a deeper love than we might feel for a stranger alone.

Over the past few years, the PC(USA) has created a new denomination-wide initiative that invites churches and Presbyteries to become Matthew 25 congregations. The program is based off of today's scripture text, and the invitation welcomes all "to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor" and "calls all of us to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities." The Matthew 25 initiative focuses on three areas: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee voted to become a Matthew 25 Presbytery earlier this year, and we are all encouraged to participate in this call to action. Initiatives such as this remind us that we are not alone in this work, but that together we can commit to making real, lasting change in our communities.

Today, we end our church year, and we enter into a very different Thanksgiving week before we begin Advent together. As we recognize this ending, let us also recognize the grief and isolation and hunger that this year has brought in many ways. We are the hungry, thirsty, weary people of God. And yet—there is hope to come. Let us go from this place with thanksgiving, also aware of the abundance that we are surrounded by and ready to share these gifts with others. Let us keep watch, live with generosity, share our resources, and see the face of God in one another as we ready ourselves for the coming of Christ. Amen.