



Scripture & Sermon

Nov 22, 2020

Pastor Kelsey

Matthew 25:31-46

31 "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 people one from another 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 that 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 who are members of my family, you did it to me.' **41** Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; **42** for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' **44** Then they also will answer, 'Lord, 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?' **45** Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' **46** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Generous and Gracious God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

One of the cool parts of living in Chicagoland for a few years was that Brennen and I got to be a part of the Alumni chapters of our colleges there, and let me tell you, big city alumni chapters of colleges bring in some big rollers that make gatherings quite the event. I got to spend the evening on the penthouse terrace overlooking Wrigley Field of an alumni who has so much family money he doesn't have to work, eating tacos and enjoying free drinks while mingling with prospective students (who also looked like they felt as out of place as I did). Brennen's alumni group got us into one of the smaller history museums after hours and we got private time to explore a few of the exhibits, while again enjoying free food and drinks and doing our best to not show how out of place we felt as a freelance artist and grad student amongst the well-to-do alumni of the north side of Chicago. Outside of the chance to dress up and take the bus and trudge through the February slush to go to the event, I hold some distinct memories of that night. Near the end of the evening, as Brennen and I were doing our final wanderings of the exhibits open to us and a final perusal of the dessert table, we heard a bit of a scuffle in the entry hall. I'll admit, we joined a few others in rubber necking. The scuffle was around a man, appearing to be experiencing homelessness and perhaps some mental health issues, who had found the door to the museum open (from our event) and had entered the warm building. He came in asking for a cup of water. I remember watching the dance of the security guards as they refused his request and basically herded him toward the door. He begged and shouted, asking for water. Just a cup of water. He became more agitated and they continued to herd him toward the door. They continued to herd him even once he was outside the door, trying to get him to leave the area. As I stood in the literally higher position from this man, the desperate human need and the coarse refusal of the museum security hit me hard. I understood why the museum staff had to hold the boundaries that they did, but to hear another human beg and shout for something as simple and necessary to survival as a cup of water, was heart wrenching. I needed to do something. I remembered there was a gas station across the street, so we grabbed our coats from the checked coat rack and bundled up and left out the same door the man did. I approached him and said something to him, I can't remember what it was, perhaps it was just an offer to get him some water. Either way, I invited him to come with us across the street to the Gas station. He was still a bit agitated but showed no sign of being a threat. I chatted with him, introducing myself and Brennen, and let him talk about whatever he wanted to say.

At some point, if I remember correctly, he introduced himself as Shawn. We went into the small gas station and I grabbed a couple big bottles of water from the fridge and went to the counter. Shawn had continued to chatter a bit, I don't remember how or what he said, but what I do remember is that when I went up to the counter to pay for the waters, the man behind the counter could tell why I was buying them, and he apologized that the man was bothering me. Again it struck me, how Shawn was being

treated and perceived by others just for needing water to drink. I shook my head, paid for the waters, and ushered Shawn back outside, asking him where he could go. I can't remember the reason, but he told us he needed to go on a specific number bus. We walked with him to the bus station that would take him where he wanted to go, I gave him a couple dollars for bus fare, made sure the water was stored away in his backpack, and waited with him until the bus came and we wished him well on his way. He was thankful and was much more calm by the time we parted ways.

I tell this story not as a way to make myself look good. By no means am I a saint, I must admit to many more times that I did not help someone I passed on the street. I tell this story for the reminder it gave me while I was living it. Time and again during my encounter with Shawn I heard the words of this passage in my mind, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." I know that I encountered Christ in Shawn that night. This was such a stark encounter for me as it all occurred in the setting of that fancy pantsy alumni event. As Brennen and I, the unemployed artist and grad student, gave out of our pockets to this man who was thirsty, we watched well-off alumni couple after well-off alumni couple exit the museum, get in taxis or ubers or their cars, and drive away, completely non-plussed, completely unaffected by the begging of a man for water. As we were unbothered by the unconventional conversation with Shawn, and fully chose to engage with him and get him the water, the gas station attendant felt the need to apologize for the man to us for burdening or bothering us. That night sticks with me, not because of what I did for him, but because of what it made me see about the world around me. That we have gotten so stuck in our politeness and concerns of safety and status and our plans so much that for most who encountered him that night, Shawn was nothing but a nuisance and was treated as such. It was a stark example for me of how easily a man's desperate request for a moment of warmth inside and a drink of water can be denied and ignored. It is those like Shawn and many that are not exactly like Shawn that this passage is talking about.

This passage is both well-known and another tough one to figure out when we look at the whole passage. You are surely familiar and think fondly of the "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, ...you did it to me" part. But, perhaps, like me until this week, were not as familiar with the counterpart of that phrase in this story, "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." We love to think about those who did do it, who are labelled righteous and herded into eternal life as inheritors of the Kingdom of heaven. But we don't often hear about those labelled as the goats that often, those who are labelled as "accursed" and sent to the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," for "eternal punishment." Now, a part of the reason why you haven't heard a lot about it is because we Methodists tend to not be fire and brimstone preachers and on the contrary tend to like to avoid these more uncomfy bits. But, also, in general, we are all going to focus on the parts that make us feel good instead of worried or unsure. We would much rather only think about the positives of

serving Christ when we serve the least of these, instead of how we are ignoring or neglecting Christ when we do not serve the least of these.

This story tells us a lot more than a simple, it's nice to do good and help others. This ethics lesson is part of a judgment lesson, or a lesson telling of the final judgment of God. It being a judgment lesson, this means that this is not just "it would be nice if you fed the hungry and clothed the naked and visited the lonely." No, this story tells of judgment based on the criterion of whether or not the people have done these things to serve others or not. Despite what grand theologians, and pastors, and much of scripture would imply through what is discussed when we talk about faith, this story paints a picture of what ultimately matters for how we are considered by Jesus is in how we live out human compassion. It does not show a judgment interaction where we are sat before the throne of Jesus and quizzed on what we believed. This story tells us that to be Christians we cannot just believe in Jesus and call it good but being a Christian means doing. Doing the work of Christ in the world of feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. This is not a call to do it because we know we should and want to win salvation. Nor is this a call that it is only what we do that matters, not what we believe. This story encourages a doing that integrates our dedication to Christ, our faith, into our whole selves. We aren't doing instead of working on our faith, but doing as a living out of our faith and taking seriously what Jesus taught us through his life and teachings and applying it to the way we live our lives.

Jesus emboldens us to reverse the world's values, putting the needs of the least of these above all else. The list of people to serve is not a random list, but does well in encapsulating all the areas of life that Jesus calls us to live by his standards and not the world's. Those who are lacking in food and water and clothes, those who are sick, those who are imprisoned or lonely, and the stranger. It speaks to those who are marginalized socio-economically and socially as well as because of physiological reasons. We are called to serve those who are the least of these by any standard and through any situation.

Jesus tells us in this story what is at stake for if we live out this call or not. For those who live out serving others, Jesus says in verse 34, they are "blessed by my Father" and "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" and in verse 46, they, the righteous, will go into "eternal life." For those who do not live out serving others, Jesus says in verse 41, they are "accursed" and are sent to "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." And in verse 46, Jesus says they will "go away into eternal punishment." This is a lot of strong language and seemingly straight forward, but it is important to unpack what these terms like eternal life and eternal punishment mean. Yes, this story makes it sound like there will be a singular judgment moment coming in the future, but we also understand the Kingdom of God as something we experience here on earth and not just in the unknown future. So, perhaps this story

is more of a metaphor and not a direct picture of what is to come. I say this, in case you weren't sure that you are a human and not a sheep or goat or you were worried we might all become sheep or goat after death. But no, joking aside, we are allowed to think about this story as not literal and bring it into the context of the Kingdom of God being something we experience in pieces while here on earth. Perhaps it is less about Jesus choosing some for eternal life and condemning others, we can think of these options between eternal life and eternal punishment as what we bring about ourselves based on the way we live out Jesus's teachings. If we are not serving and having true compassion for the least of these, if that is not a part of your walk with Christ, then you are missing out on being a part of bringing about God's Kingdom, the beauty of eternal life, here on earth. On the flipside, if we are not serving others with compassion, but instead hoard resources or look only to improving our own lives, the quality of our lives is greatly diminished. One of the ways to think about the use of the term "eternal life" is to think about it as quality instead of quantity. We hear eternal and we think of immortality, but instead, another way to think about it is to indicate an unending quality. So, eternal life indicates abundance and eternal punishment indicates scarcity and limitations. When we are living out compassion with serving the least of these, we are living in God's mindset of abundance and eternal life, instead of living in eternal punishment or a mindset of scarcity, a life ruled by limitations and fear.

This story, like others that we have discussed in Matthew, seems to draw a line between two groups of people. There were the wheat and the tares, the good soil and bad soil, the good fruit and the bad fruit, and now the sheep and the goats. But the good news is that God is not so black and white with us. This parable reminds us that we are both the sheep and the goats as we have helped the one and not helped the one. When we look closely at what Jesus said, he says, "Just as you did (or did not do) it to ONE of the least of these." The specific use of the word one, implies that if we have served ONE of the least of these then we are considered a sheep or among the righteous; though by the same logic, if we have not served ONE of the least of these then we are considered a goat or among the accursed. If we are a sheep by serving ONE and we are a goat by not serving ONE, then by all likelihood, all of us easily fit within both groups. We are both a sheep and goat, living both, as we live out ways that limit God's work in the world and ways that bring about God's Kingdom.

It is by God's grace that we get to change from being a Goat to a Sheep. By God's grace that no matter how much we have been a goat, no matter how many times we have not helped someone, that when we do decide to do differently and truly serve another, that we do get to participate in the Kingdom of God in that moment. That we can always come back to choosing to serving the least of these and getting to take part in God's eternal life. In every moment that we serve another we are part of building God's Kingdom on earth. By God's grace we can realize that we have been a bit of a goat lately and that we need to shift our way of living to that of a sheep.

Living as a sheep is not just about doing good and serving others but about living in the mindset of God, of eternal life and not eternal punishment. Eternal life lives a life in an abundance mindset, trusting that God will maintain us and that if we give and serve others, we trust that when we need it, the people of God will help us. It is a trust that we have enough and that we will find enough again. It is choosing to be generous and not hoard our resources. Right now, that call feels all too concrete, as we all are affected by some people's hoarding of the basics like toilet paper and paper towel. I, personally, don't think that hoarding toilet paper is a determining factor for our place with Jesus. But, it does give us a new perspective on the widespread effects of a few living in a scarcity or greedy mindset instead of abundance and service.

This is not a sermon to encourage you to donate your last dollars instead of buying necessary groceries for your family. This story is a reminder that Jesus sees all of those that are the least of these or are experiencing being a least of these right now and Jesus's call is to those who are not the least of these to be the ones serving them. If you find yourself in the privileged place that you have extra, that you are not the least of these, figure out what you can do to serve the least of these. If you find yourself as a least of these, then this story acts as an encouragement that Jesus stands with you in solidarity and calls God's people to surround and support you (no matter how good they are at living that out).

Again, this passage also reminds us that there are many ways that people can be the least of these. Money, food, clothing, health, company. It means that we can be generous in any or all of those ways. Money, food, clothing and other material items, or just your presence or company. Maybe you don't have anything more than what you need to survive in money right now, but do you have an extra can of beans in your cabinet that your kids won't eat? Or do you have a pair of shoes or a coat that have sat at the back of your closet for years? Do you have an extra moment to write a letter to someone who is lonely? There are many ways we can serve each other and give true compassion for those who have the least.

So, what does any of this have to do with today's theme of Gratitude? I'll admit, I was stumped for a little bit as I planned worship around this passage, but as I pondered this passage that is ultimately about true generosity toward others, I realized the important connection. Generosity, as laid out in this passage, is a practice of abundance and gratitude. It is a practice of acknowledging and not taking for granted all that we do have. Being thankful for and appreciating those things that we have. And then acknowledging the areas that we have more than enough, recognizing where we have abundance and sharing it with others that don't have enough.

It is likely a coincidence, but if it is, it's a good one, that Thanksgiving and Christmas are so close to each other and in the order that they are. I know I have often wondered why two of the most similar holidays are so close to each other, but thinking about it in regards to generosity, their proximity makes a bit more sense. With

Thanksgiving first, we spend some time, just before the season of giving first being thankful for all that we have. The family, the homes, the jobs, the church family. We are called into a time of gratitude and thankfulness for all that we have, encouraging that abundance mindset as we move into the Christmas season that is all about giving inspired by the ultimate gift of Christ becoming God among us, Emmanuel.

In a year like this one, gratitude is one of the last attitudes we are likely to land on. It has been a year of loss ranging from the superficial to the necessity to the beloved. Though in this year of loss, we have also had to face how much we have taken for granted during normal times. Despite the fact that it is hardest to be grateful in times like these, it is perhaps even more important to spend intentional time in gratitude. Spending time in gratitude can help balance us and help us to persevere through continued hard times.

There are tons of ways to practice gratitude, and cultivating an attitude of gratitude can be a bit more involved, but to give an example of what practicing gratitude can be like, and give us all a moment of true gratitude in the midst of this strange Thanksgiving week, we are going to do a simple gratitude practice together. If you got a physical bulletin or if you are looking at a digital bulletin, you will find at the bottom of the Prayer Requests announcement page our gratitude practice. You will find 4 sentence starters that we will spend a little bit of time filling out.

Gratitude Practice

1. I am grateful to God for _____

2. I am grateful for _____

3. I am unexpectedly grateful for _____

4. I am grateful for my church family because _____

Now that you should have the prompt, I am going to play a short song that Mike played for us and while the music plays I encourage you to spend the time considering each of the 4 phrases and how you could complete them. Do fill them out if you want, also feel free to spend the time reflecting on each and not landing on one specific conclusion. The more things to be grateful for the better! When the song ends, I will close us in prayer.

Gratitude Practice & Reflection

During time of reflection we played "Give Thanks."

Holy and loving God,

Even in the worst of times, you offer us blessings. So, today, in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of political strife, in the middle of the uncertainty and chaos that have overtaken our society, we dare to say thank you. Thank you for family, even when we can't meet face to face. Thank you for faithful friends who support us. Thank you for food to eat, and the opportunity to share with others through food pantries. Thank you for medical workers who continue to go above and beyond to care for people even at risk to themselves. Thank you for essential workers who continue working even when many of us stay home. Thank you for phones and computers that help keep us connected through this trying time. Most of all, we thank you for the love you offer us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, to teach us what mercy means, what grace means, what salvation means. We pray this day to truly be your followers and offer your mercy, grace, and salvation to the world. Help us love with our whole hearts, and to be encouraged and strengthened by you. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.