

**“When was it that we saw you”
Matthew 25:31-46**

You might have heard it said, “If I had known that I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself.” Actually, some of you might have said of yourself, “If I had known I was going to live so long I would have taken better care of myself.” Come to think of it, I am beginning to say the same thing of myself, “If I had known that I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself.”

Jesus has a lot to say about eternal life, and especially here in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus over and over talks in very graphic terms about the ominous consequences of a place of eternal punishment. I struggle with that, especially knowing how to talk about that and think about that. It is tempting to just gloss over it. I would much rather talk about the love of God and the grace of God, and that actually is the gospel, but this talk about wailing and gnashing of teeth and eternal punishment keeps getting repeated over and over. At the very least, it is a rhetorical way of emphasizing that this is very, very important, not just some religious platitude.

There is both simplicity and complexity in this story of ultimate judgment. I did some research this week and learned a little about the differences and similarities between sheep and goats. First of all, in those times in the East nearly all flocks consisted of both sheep and goats, as both animals provided resources that were very important to the needs of families. Did you know that goat’s tails go up and sheep’s tails go down? They eat differently. Goats are browsers and sheep are grazers. Goats are very agile and will go out of their way to reach twigs and leaves, vines and shrubs, while sheep prefer to keep their head down eating short tender grass and clover that grows close to the soil. Some people say that goats are smarter than sheep because they are very independent and inquisitive and can be quite aloof from humans while sheep have a strong “flock mentality” which means that they very much prefer to be in groups, but rather than being a sign of lack of intelligence the flock is their best source of security.

The wool from the sheep provided clothing for the people. The hair from the goats was the best source to use for rope and making tents and bags. The goats were a good source of milk and cheese. They were both valued as a source of meat to eat as well. In cold weather they required very different care. Sheep preferred to remain outside flocked together but goats, even though more independent needed to be sheltered so it would not be uncommon for farmers to have the task of separating the sheep from the goats.

One reason this context is important is that it is important to keep in mind that both sheep and goats have real value, and that is central to the underlying theme of judgement. There are no “throw away” people. God has not created any

human soul to be collateral damage. This central principle of creation is affirmed in Genesis, “Male and female God created them; in God’s own image were they created.” It is true that judgment insists that we think in terms of separation, but it is also important to hold in our view what this strategic metaphor of the Last Judgment makes clear. That is that any who might be considered the least, or the most expendable of human persons are clearly identified with the Son of Man in all his glory.

Earlier this weekend we were up in Jacksonville to celebrate our grandson’s second birthday. He has learned so many things in two short years. He is fun to talk with. His father has taught him to bump knuckles together while exclaiming, “Hoffman’s rule!” I loved hearing the enthusiasm in his voice! There is something in the human spirit that is set free when we proclaim who we are and what we love.

Today is the last Sunday in the church year. It is called Christ the King Sunday. The sweep of the liturgical year that begins with the waiting of Advent and moves through the birth of Jesus, his baptism, ministry, teaching, passion, death and resurrection, the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the church as an embodiment of the kingdom of God – the entire narrative comes to a climax today. To put it in terms that even a child would understand, today is the day when we proclaim with great boldness and great joy, “Christ rules!”

Today is the day when we get to say, we know where we are headed – we’re headed toward God. We know where we’ve come from. We have come from God. God is both our Alpha and our Omega, both our beginning and our end.

The title that Matthew uses for Jesus here is the Son of Man. It is not just a title; it has a meaning. It means that Jesus is the One who embodies what it really means to be a truly human being. Jesus is our King and our Model as well as being our Judge. He speaks of an inheritance that has been waiting for us for a long, long time for just the right time. And Jesus is very clear about the criteria that is being used in this judgment. It is both clear and surprising at the same time.

Speaking from a place of ultimate authority we would expect Jesus to talk about acknowledging him as Lord and Savior, but in this story he doesn’t refer to that expression of loyalty at all. We might expect him to say something about asking him to come into our hearts, but here he doesn’t say anything about that either. I have heard so many talks that assume that evangelism is about taking the gospel to people and places that don’t have it and where Jesus has never been, but in this story Jesus seems to be challenging us to see that our greatest sin lies not in having the wrong theology or in refusing to believe as someone else seem to think we need to believe or taking Jesus to places where he has never been before. Our sin lies in neglecting to respond to him where he already is.

In this story Jesus gets very specific about where he is. Each place and each circumstance has a lot to do with lack and need and suffering. Christ chooses these places. Christ inhabits these places, and he waits for us to show up. He talks about how he has been in need, how he has been hungry, how he has been thirsty, how he has been a stranger, how he has experienced nakedness, how he has been sick, how he has been in prison, and the children of the inheritance have responded to his needs in very specific ways. They fed him. They gave him something to drink. They welcomed him. They gave him clothing. They cared for him. They visited him in prison.

I am especially mindful that this past week has been our blessing to host Family Promise, and for each of you that has participated, I dearly hope that it has been a blessing to you. I am also aware, as you are, that the ongoing requests for our food pantry continue to rise each month. I am grateful that together as a community of faith that we can respond to those requests in Jesus name. I am also very grateful for all the effort and leadership of the Glory Group to respond to families in need through Palmetto Elementary. I am also very proud of the way in which the attitude of this congregation has been transformed over the last couple years in hosting our Hispanic Mission. We give all the credit to the Holy Spirit for the fellowship we share together and for the relationships that are being formed. Each of these ministries and many, many more are just a few examples of how together we can respond to the opportunity to serve Christ in our midst.

But I also want to sound a note of caution here as well. We need to stick with the story. We need to continually encourage an attitude of humility within ourselves and among ourselves. A couple weeks ago the office was closed on Tuesday in observance of Veteran's Day. That is one of the days we normally distribute food baskets. I just happened to be in the office working on some stuff. A man came to the office to get a food basket. I explained to him that we were actually closed but since I happened to be there and there happened to be a couple bags of food already made up I told him to come in. He sat on one side of the desk while I sat on the other side going through the card file to find his name.

While I looked for his card he was apologizing to me for coming to get food. I think we were both about the same age. He said that he came as seldom as possible but things were really tough right now. I just looked up at him and said, "Sir you don't have to say that. It is OK. It really is." Then for just a minute I looked at him and realized how little I knew about him. Only a desk separated the two of us, but that desk could have been a chasm, because I had absolutely no idea at all what it was like to sit on his side of the desk, asking for food.

I told him that. I said, "I don't know what you are going through right now, but I know someone who does. Jesus knows. So hold your head up, you don't need to apologize to me." Now I don't want to idealize this at all. Not everyone who is in need is cooperative or appreciative or patient, but why should they be? To tell the truth, when I am in need, when I really want something, when I am stressed

out I am often not at my cooperative best, I am often not as appreciative or patient as I ought to be.

Responding to those in great need also asks something more of us as well. It asks a deepened spirituality, a maturing relationship with Christ. You see, Jesus not only chooses to inhabit places of great need and great suffering, Jesus also waits for us to recognize those places of great need and hunger within ourselves. Jesus asks us to be clear about our great thirst, about the nakedness of our vulnerabilities, about the places in our lives the experiences that we keep under lock and key. Christ the King is patient with us but he is also waiting for us as well. He is waiting for us to recognize those places within ourselves. He knows that if we have not recognized the poverty within our own souls, and how he dwells there, it is very hard to serve him in others without burnout, without being prone to resentment, without being patronizing.

When was it that we saw you? That was the question that everyone asked. Some asked the question because they had just been responding to the needs in front of them. I would name that a kind of spiritual anonymity. They are not motivated by trying to get credit of any kind. They are not building a resume. They are not even trying to fix the world.

Others asked the question because they had been on some idealized hunt for the truly needy that is really fear in a fancy disguise. Behind their question is the implication that “if I had only known it was you” I would have acted differently.

But it is a very good question. It is a very important question. When was it that we saw you? In my devotional time this week I read about a figure in Buddhist spirituality called a “bodhisattva”. This is one who is enlightened, but at the same time modestly declines to enter into ultimate enlightenment until everyone else enters first.¹ That really spoke to me as I considered this question of “When did we see you?” I felt a little shy about using a figure from Buddhism to illustrate this sermon from this pulpit. After all, we are Christians, not Buddhists, but then I realized – Jesus was saying something very similar as well when he declared I am not only Alpha but also Omega, and I am not only the first but also the last.

I pray that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened to see that there is no person in who Christ does not dwell and that there is no place in which he is not already working to make his home, and there is no person through whom he might not startle you and me with the blazing glory of his presence.

“Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me.” That is Christ’s challenge and invitation to each of us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ Page 108. Quoted from The Better Part in Community: Oneness in Contemplation. 2008, Contemplative Outreach.

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