

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
November 23, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46
"You Did It to Me"
Pastor John Guthrie

The priest was preparing a dying man for his voyage into the great beyond. Whispering firmly, the priest said, "Denounce the devil! Let him know how little you think of his evil!" The dying man said nothing. The priest repeated his order. Still the dying man said nothing. The priest asked, "Why do you refuse to denounce the devil and his evil?" The dying man said, "Until I know where I'm heading, I don't think I ought to aggravate anybody."

And so we have it from Matthew's pen, once again: dire warnings about eternal fire and eternal punishment. The story of the judgment of the nations, also sometimes called the parable of the sheep and the goats, is the last of the four stories that Jesus tells in this long speech in chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's gospel. Remember that all of this long section deals with questions about the Kingdom of God, and about what it will be like when Jesus returns after his long absence, which in turn follows his resurrection.

Chapter 24 is mostly about what the last days will be like. Remember that the constant theme in that chapter is "being ready" for the return of Christ. As a quick reminder the four stories are these: (1) faithful and unfaithful slaves; (2) the ten bridesmaids; (3) the parable of the talents, in which three different slaves are given different amounts of money while their master is away; and (4) this narrative about the judgment of the nations. The four stories continue Jesus' teaching on what it means to "be ready."

We didn't look at the first story in much detail. Briefly, Jesus discusses a slave who is placed in charge of his master's household while the master goes on a long journey. The slave is to care for the other slaves, and if he does so diligently, he will be blessed and will be put in charge of all the master's possessions. But if that slave convinces himself that the master will never return, begins to mistreat the other slaves, and fails to carry out his charge, the master will return on a day the wicked slave least expects him. Then he will be cut off from the master's estate and cast out with the hypocrites where there will be, of course, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

You can easily see how the first story connects with the last one, about the judgment of the nations. Both stories compare two very different patterns of behavior. In the first case there is blessing. In the second case, there is punishment.

For Matthew our behavior Matters. For Jesus, our behavior matters. Remember back in chapter 7, Jesus says to his listeners, "Not all those who say, 'Lord, Lord' will be admitted to the kingdom of heaven, but only the ones who do the will of my Father in heaven." Once again, in these two chapters toward the end of the gospel, "doing the will of our Father in heaven" turns out to be pretty critical.

However, in spite of the many passages in Matthew that offer up warnings of judgment, I think most of them are really intended for us to run ourselves through a reality check. The question

we are meant to ask is, “How are we doing?” As we wait for the return of the Shepherd, the King, are we living the way he commanded us to live? In particular, in relation to today’s reading, are we caring for the least of those among us? By the way, this passage makes a connection with Christ as the King in verses 34 and 40. Isn’t it interesting that the shepherd becomes the King in this passage?

It would be easy to read this text about the judgment of the nations to mean that we are saved by our own actions, by the way we treat the least among us. But we know from the entire testimony of scripture that that’s not how it works. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Salvation, redemption, new and eternal life are free gifts of grace from our Father, bought at great price by the sacrifice of the Son. Today’s reading obviously makes no appeal to the free gift of grace, but as in all New Testament passages like this one, we are to understand that our care for the least among us is a natural response to that gift of grace. We have been given a priceless gift. How will we live in response?

It seems that Jesus had very much in mind the passage from Ezekiel that we heard a moment ago. In that passage the LORD is identified as a shepherd who will return his sheep to their land, feed them and guard them. How interesting in that passage that the LORD says he will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but will destroy the fat and the strong. There is a note of justice also in that text: the LORD castigates his sheep for pushing and butting the weaker animals. There will be justice, says the LORD.

Returning once again to the Matthew text, note that neither the sheep nor the goats realize that they are caring, or failing to care, for Christ. The sheep simply show compassion because that what they do: it is their nature to do so. And the goats fail to show compassion for Christ, because it is their nature to do so. The sheep are “being ready” for the return of the Son of Man, but they don’t even realize they are ready: they simply live as the Son of Man has instructed them. And the goats don’t realize they are not ready: they simply have failed to live by the instructions of the King.

So how are we to apply this seemingly straightforward lesson? Actually, the application can be somewhat complicated, I have found. For example, some people ask the question, “How far away must I extend my reach in order to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned?” Only as far as my own community? Only as far as my own nation? Or does the command of Son of Man extend to all of the least of these, wherever they may be, in the world.

I believe that the only reliable answer to that question must be found in scripture. We cannot appeal to secular authorities and we cannot allow our reach to be limited by prejudice or xenophobia. What does scripture have to say about how far our compassion is to reach? In my reading of scripture, there is no geographical limitation on the compassion we are commanded to demonstrate to the least of these. We are commanded to demonstrate compassion for the least wherever they may be.

And then there is the question, in our 21st century context, about what agents are to demonstrate this compassion. All of us will agree that the commandments to care for the hungry, thirsty, lonely, sick, naked, and imprisoned apply to us as individuals. I don’t see how any reading of the text could escape that conclusion. I also believe that those commandments apply to fellowships of those who follow the Son of Man, the Shepherd, the King. So as Community Presbyterian Church we are commanded to care for the least of these among us.

We do that quite well, of course, through numerous mission projects and trips, the mission expenditures of our Community Presbyterian Women, the deacons' holiday food baskets, the support of our mission coworker Josh Vis in Brazil, support for Iron County Care and Share, the Women's Crisis Center, the Salvation Army, and much more. Community Presbyterian Church is a fellowship strongly committed to compassion in our community and the world. And that is the way it should be.

So we come then to the more contentious question of the role our various levels of government should play in caring for the least among us. We can all agree that government should be promoting independence and self-sufficiency as much as possible. That simply makes economic sense. But beyond that, how much should our local, state, and federal governments be caring for the least among us? For many among us it is important that we maintain and uphold our identity as a Christian nation. So if that identity is important, are we able to simply jettison the commandment we have in Matthew chapter 25, to care for the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, and imprisoned? If we consider ourselves a Christian nation, is it not incumbent on our various levels of government to care for the most vulnerable ones among us? And if not, what scripture can we appeal to that lets these levels of government off the hook?

And finally we have to ask ourselves the question, do we really want to care for all of these least ones? We can generally work up a strong compassion for those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, or sick. We naturally want to meet the physical needs of people. But what about the stranger or the prisoner? Strangers are often those who are different from us in skin color, language, ethnicity, religion. Prisoners often have done something that causes them to be imprisoned, and we are often a little afraid of prisoners. It's a little harder to show compassion for strangers and prisoners. The Son of Man doesn't let us off the hook. We are commanded to care for these least ones, too.

Matthew 25:31-46 is among my most favorite passages in scripture. Why? Because I believe that following Christ is not meant to be easy. There are lots of other human enterprises that are easy, but following Jesus is not supposed to be that way. We are to pick up our own crosses and follow. To show compassion for the most vulnerable is contrary to our human nature. We would rather show compassion for those we know and love. Jesus says when we care for those in need, we care for him. And when we fail to care for those in need, we fail to care for him. That's not difficult to understand. I treasure this passage because it commands us to act on our convictions. It calls us to demonstrate what our faith is all about. And it's pretty hard to wiggle out of what we are called to do in this text.

But we are not to be running around consciously saying to ourselves, "Must care for someone in need today. Must care for someone in need today. Otherwise I will be a goat, and I will be cast into the eternal fire and suffer eternal punishment." Rather we are to say to ourselves, "The Son of Man died but lives so that I can be free, so that I can have life eternal, rich, and joyous. What can I do today to demonstrate his love to someone in need?"

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."