

When Was It That We Saw You?

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Third Presbyterian Church
November 26, 2017 (Christ the King Sunday)
Matthew 25:31-46

I hope you all had a blessed Thanksgiving. Our family treasured our time together – it's always good to have the kids home. Cozy holiday weekends are times to hunker down, to savor what's good, to share the gift of being with one another. To accept one another, quirks and all, and sit at the table together. To let someone know that they matter to you.

It stood in contrast to a troubling week, a shocking week, an "I know not all is right with the world but, are you kidding me, this?" kind of a week. I'm talking about the stomach-churning daily news avalanche of egregious misconduct against women primarily, by people with position and power. It's one thing for such a scandal to include Hollywood power brokers, or people who hold views that are anathema to me. But then came allegations against a politician whose policies I kinda liked, and then my favorite and most trusted morning newscaster. The light of day once again exposed the vast brokenness of our world – people of every social and political persuasion.

I want to look each one of them in the eye and ask, "What were you thinking??" I'm glad to hear them being called out. This kind of behavior is wrong. Flat out wrong on so many levels. At its most basic, it's using the power of position over someone else to get what you want, or failing to understand where you have that power, and objectifying the other person as a trophy to be won, or an acquisition to be obtained, or a means to some particular end. Such behavior dehumanizes people, and dehumanization always exacts an enormous cost. It treats people not just as "less than;" it treats them as "the least of these."

In today's text from Matthew, Jesus says how we respond to "the least of these" matters in the kingdom of God. "Just as you did it to those who are most weak and vulnerable, you did it to me. And just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." If what Jesus said was simply about doing humanitarian good deeds, it would be remarkable in and of itself. For there is more than enough opportunity in our world to extend compassion and meet the needs of those who are vulnerable in some way.

We know people are hungry and thirsty right in our neighborhoods – they visit food programs around the city, including our own food cupboard, and Dining Room Ministry. We know people are looking for a place to be welcomed. Friends who are transgender, or gay or lesbian do not always find a place at the family table, or genuine welcome in a place of worship. We know people who can't afford to buy clothing. We collect much-needed mittens and hats, socks and undies along with our Christmas basket donations (if you haven't yet signed up, please do!). Bryan Stevenson's book "Just Mercy," which is the topic of Thursday night's book discussion, shows how our criminal justice system disproportionately convicts and incarcerates people of color, destroying their lives and those of their families. (If you haven't yet read his compelling story, I hope you will.)

Scripture is clear. How we treat people who are vulnerable indicates where we stand relative to God's intention.

It's human tendency to want to make this all about us. We want to know where we stand in God's scheme of things. We want to be the sheep in today's reading from Matthew. We want to be the righteous ones, the good guys – the ones who intuitively recognize Jesus and do the right thing.

We want to be the ones who get all the right answers in Jeopardy: Gospel Edition. I'll take "Do it to the Least of These" for \$200, Alex. The answer is: "I was hungry." I hit the buzzer. "What is Did you feed him?" That's correct, Alex says. Pick again! I'll take "Least of these for \$400," Alex. And the answer is: "I was a stranger who just moved to town." I ring in first again. "What is Did you welcome him?" That's correct. And so it goes. I want to be the one who sweeps the category and wins the game!

This text has a lot to say about how Jesus would have us treat the least of these. Yet it's more than an instruction manual for moral and ethical behavior. It's more than a set of qualifications to win the "Community volunteer of the year" award. It's part of Jesus' answer to his disciples' big question, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" How will we know you've come? It's Matthew's story of the last judgment. And this is where this ancient text can be difficult.

Jill Duffield subtitles it, "God's Big Sort," and summarizes it this way: "Jesus, in his glory, all the angels as his posse, sorts the sheep from the goats. Sheep who saw me in the least of these to the right, goats who didn't, you go left. Neither of these are a random picking of teams, a numbering off, or at the whim of a magic hat. No, divine determination of placement comes down to how we treated our flock mates...Did we see and respond with compassion to "the least of these"? Did we see the face of Christ in those in prison, the hungry and the sick, and treat them as we'd treat our King, or did we put them in another category entirely? When the time comes, that's the only test question we will have had to answer correctly - not with our words, but with our lives."

Our dreams of winning Jeopardy: Gospel Edition are dashed. The light of Scripture has once again exposed the vast brokenness of our own selves, not just that of others. We don't always respond with compassion. We exploit advantages we have by virtue of our birth place in society. We conveniently look away from unjust treatment of people. We fail to speak out when we should. We keep silent when someone is harassed. We pass judgment on whether or not someone is worthy of our assistance. We are not always the good guys.

If Gospel means "good news," then there must be good news in this difficult passage for all those who've been demeaned and dehumanized, who've been abused or neglected, who've gone hungry or been unjustly caught in the school to prison pipeline. If Gospel means "good news," then there must be good news even for us.

In one sermon on this text, the late Fred Craddock draws out what the good news in this dramatic scene of judgment is. "In the scene before us, it is God who finishes history. The creator of all is the completer of all things...Let there be adjustment in the inequities that all have experienced. Let there be redress of grievances even when the fault is found to be with us...Let justice be established as the governing principle of God's world. It is no wonder that early Christians prayed the prayer that seems so strange to some of us, the prayer that said simply, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Theologian N.T. Wright says "Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race...[It] doesn't simply mean 'punishing wickedness,'...it means bringing the world back into balance. This image is that justice will at last be done...[and it] hinges on the way in which those who are judged have treated one of the least of these."

We would do well to look at how Jesus' message fits into Matthew's entire Gospel narrative. Immediately following Jesus' difficult words about judging the world, he begins his journey toward the cross - the journey on behalf of all the world.

Today after the prayer of confession, Ernest offered the assurance of forgiveness - my favorite one from the Book of Common Worship because it is such good news: "Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us." The one who is in a position to judge us is the one who has come to save. And the one who has come to save is the one who is with us here and now, in "the least of these."

Only two short months ago five people from our partner church in Kenya, the Kihumo Parish, spent ten days with us at Third Church. Just 36 hours into their visit here, Rev. Thairu, Donald, James, Sarah, and Mary paid a visit to the Third Church Dining Room Ministry. Those of you who serve with or have observed Dining Room Ministry know what happens there every Saturday. Around 10am, 10-12 people arrive in our Celebration Center kitchen downstairs. They pull out the pre-planned menu and the recipes for that day.

That particular Saturday at the end of September, it was Menu #1 – Mama's meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, mixed vegetables, bread and butter, dessert, coffee and water and milk.

Team members went to the pantry and the refrigerator and freezer to find all of the ingredients they needed: 15 pounds of ground beef, 3 pounds of onions, 18 eggs, salt, Allspice, 7½ cups applesauce, 7 ½ cups oats, brown sugar, ground cloves, frozen Mixed Vegetables, and more. Those ingredients didn't just magically appear. Earlier that week, someone went and shopped for them. And before that, someone carefully created the recipes - designed to feed 80 hungry people – in a way that could be prepared from start to finish in a short 90 minutes.

Our Kenyan guests were eager to jump in and be part of it. Alongside the regular DRM team members, they mixed. They scooped. They set tables. And I can tell you – I don't think I've ever seen anyone exude so much joy filling a tray full of those little tiny serving cups with ketchup, all while singing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" in Kiswahili.

Our Kenyan friends also looked with wide-eyed wonder and attentive curiosity at the DRM notebook that is "command central" for every team. They even took notes. And once the meal serving began, and hosts and guests intermingled, Rev. Thairu turned to me and said, "This is a more powerful sermon than either you or I could ever preach from the pulpit." He was right, of course. And a few minutes later, James echoed that sentiment when he said: "This is the best Gospel."

It *is* the best Gospel. It *is* the authentic Gospel. Jesus is already here. Jesus has already come to meet us in the here and now. Jesus is present in "the least of these." He is hope in the flesh and has come to right the world for everyone who is harassed and who harasses. He has come to right the world for everyone who is oppressed and who oppresses. He has come to right the world for everyone who is neglected and who neglects. He has come to right the world for everyone who is forgotten and who forgets. The one who shines the light on our brokenness is the very same one who can heal it. Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

Amen.