

The One You Least Expect
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Recently I heard about an urban parochial school that was trying to live within an increasingly tight budget. One day in the cafeteria line, the nun on duty placed a sign by a large bowl of apples that read, "Take only one. God is watching." What she didn't anticipate was the hastily-scribbled sign a student had placed by the dessert tray that read, "Take all you want. God's watching the apples."

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year, and just as the liturgical calendar begins with Advent, and the preparation for Jesus' birth, so the year ends with the final triumph of Christ coming in glory to rule all the nations of the earth. (It used to be called "Christ the King" Sunday, but somebody thought that sounded too monarchical for American tastes, plus sexist, so it's now called "Reign of Christ.")

Whatever we call it, the day affirms that the Creator and Ruler of the universe really *is* watching; that God cares enough to pay attention to the daily actions of earth's people and is intimately familiar with our comings and goings, decisions and dares. It can be comforting to personalize God's interest, but it can also scare the Hell out of us, particularly if we add to "watchfulness" the belief that God is keeping a tally of what He observes (come to think of it, not unlike Santa Claus). Ending up in heaven after you die depends upon your score at the end of your life, and you pray you come out on the positive side of the divine ledger. Thank God for grace; yet on the other hand, it's no wonder that many contemporary people experience no fear at the prospect of a final judgment. If God is watching what we do, then God will see hard-working, caring people, who generally try to do the right thing. That's not arrogance; that's just the way it is. We are pretty nice people, and good-hearted folk.

So when we hear the morning scripture text, we might figure we get a pass. It's a parable Jesus told to describe the last judgment, the culmination of human history in which the Son sits on the throne and draws a dividing line between those who are blessed and those who are accursed, those consigned to eternal punishment, and those welcomed into eternal life. We find this particular vision only in the gospel of Matthew, where it is situated at the very end of Jesus' life, right before his betrayal, arrest, and execution. Here, in the shadow of his impending

cross, Jesus pictures a glorious scene of heavenly angels surrounding his throne, and all the nations of the world, people of every kindred, tribe, and tongue gathered before him. You can't accuse Jesus of modesty! The throne is his judgment seat, and with divine insight, he begins to separate the people into two groups. But notice how neither group has a clue as to the basis for the separation. This apparent lack of expectation by either sheep or goats might make us want to re-think our own certainty about which group we find ourselves, because there's an aura of surprise framing the whole scene. A reading found on p. 29 of the New Testament section of the pew/chapel Bibles . . . from the gospel according to Matthew in the 25th chapter, at the 31st verse. Listen for God's Word to the Church! [Matthew 25:31-46]

Without a doubt the first thing we should notice in this text is that judgment belongs to the Son of Man, the cosmic Christ who rules over all. It may be obvious, but it bears saying explicitly in these days of polarized debate and deeply divided discourse. In the political arena, in the sanctuary, in the neighborhood coffee shop, Americans have become quick to characterize and judge, often on little more basis than political party, religious affiliation, or sweeping generalizations of "liberal" or "conservative." Judgment belongs to God alone. It is not human prerogative to label and condemn.

Having said that, however, the text leaves little doubt about the basis upon which divine judgment is rendered. It's our treatment of the "least of these;" the way we have cared for—or not cared for—people in need. In fact, the way Jesus tells the parable actually allows him four opportunities to tick off the laundry list of the hungry, the homeless poor, the sick, the prisoner, just in case we had forgotten. Jesus draws the dividing line against one criterion. Here at the final judgment, nothing else matters: not our nationality, not our socio-economic status, not even our religious beliefs. There is no litmus test but one: whether or not we showed compassion to those in dire straits, the ones often overlooked, ignored, and even scorned. *Come...inherit the kingdom...for I was hungry and thirsty and a stranger, and sick and in prison...and you cared for me.*

All well and good. But we already know we're supposed to uphold our part of the social contract. *To whom much is given, much will be required.* So we donate gently used clothing to Katrina victims, we will prepare and deliver 100 Thanksgiving food baskets this week to needy local families, we regularly visit hospital rooms and nursing homes and bring flowers, prayers, and cheer, we are generous in our financial support of others in need. Are we missing something here?

What I find remarkable about this text is not its exhortation to serve. It is instead in the startling announcement that Jesus is present in the needy neighbor. *I was hungry....I was thirsty....I was a stranger....I was sick....I was in prison....*the One who judges all the nations, before whom angels bow identifies himself with the welfare mother of three, the “illegal alien” who crosses the Sonoran desert to find work, the man with AIDS, the convicted felon. It’s really unimaginable and disturbing. God is not watching “from a distance”—high and far away, removed from human suffering, but is right down here in the thick of it, in the worst places of pain and hurt. If we are seeking God, if we hunger for connection with the divine, we need look no further than the homeless shelter, the soup kitchen, the prison.

Not long ago, the book discussion group to which I belong read a biography of a man I’d never heard of before, yet who embodies this kind of servant compassion. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder profiles the vision and work of Dr. Paul Farmer, who is, as the book’s subtitle proclaims, a “man who would cure the world.” As a physician working in rural Haiti and in Latin America, he is utterly committed to eradicating communicable disease among the underserved poor. Raised in a nominally Roman Catholic home, Farmer’s Christian convictions motivate him to put faith into action. He is fond of quoting a Haitian saying “God gives, but doesn’t share” by which he means that God gives us humans everything we need to flourish, but He’s not the one who’s supposed to divvy it all up. You want to see where the crucified Christ abides today? –he asks. “Go to where the poor are suffering and fighting back, and that is where you will find him.”

When you come right down to it, Jesus is saying that the neighbor in need turns out to be someone you and I need. She is one of the ways God is present, one of the ways God breaks through our insulation and isolation in order to save us from greed and indifference. In the one we least expect, we see God. The cries of the poor for help are God’s own words of judgment, calling us to look, calling us to care, calling us to respond as we would to members of our own family, for so they are.

Maybe that’s the clue to applying this text to our daily lives: it invites us to a new way of seeing. Lord, when did we see you? Amazingly, that question was asked by both the righteous, who are unaware of the good they have done, and by the accursed, who are unaware of the good they might have done, but didn’t. Neither those who served nor those who did not understood that it was Christ to whom they had opportunity to minister. That might well decrease our tolerance for social conditions in which the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. Maybe we begin by looking at the world with new eyes: to see instead of chronic problems,

depressing statistics, and solution-resistant conditions, the face of Christ. In his best-selling book *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis describes one of his mentors, an elderly Pentecostal woman named Mary Glover, a regular volunteer in the weekly food line at Church of the Savior in Washington DC. She often said the prayer before they opened the doors each Saturday morning, and it was almost always the same: Lord, we know that you'll be comin' through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well. [Wallis, *God's Politics*, p. 217]

So how well do we treat the Christ who draws near to us in the persistent cries and annoying shouts and despairing whispers of the needy? Turns out it's a matter of life and death. For some it may be the difference, literally, between life and death: food in their stomach, a roof over their heads, a cup of cold water. For us all, it is the difference between spiritual death and spiritual life: lives that are disfigured through self-absorption and selfishness, cut off from their Source, or the fullness of life, serving the common good, rooted in the love of God.

In this week that will invoke our expressions of grateful love and thanksgiving, let us remember that God is watching. In fact, friends, God is here, in the one we least expect. *Life is short, and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling with us. O be swift to love, make haste to be kind.* [Henri Amiel]

**TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S
ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER
FOREVER. AMEN.**

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