

Intending to Do Good

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 25:31-46 on Sunday, November 26, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem

I.

Perhaps you've felt the seasonal confusion this week – making your Thanksgiving meal while Halloween skeletons and pumpkins look over your shoulder, watching the Thanksgiving Day parade while wearing your new matching Christmas PJs, deflating the turkey inflatable while putting up the Santa one in its place. This is an odd week, you know.

Add to the cultural change-of-seasons the liturgical one, and today finds us in this most interesting Sunday of the church year we call Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday concludes the long season after Pentecost and ends the liturgical year before Advent's beginning next Sunday. Positioned seasonally where it is, Christ the King Sunday orients us to the One who comes in ways we don't expect, whose power is made perfect in weakness, who enters not as a warrior but as a babe.

And in our liturgical rhythms, this Sunday is always the last we spend in the gospel that has occupied our energies over the past year, this year the Gospel of Matthew. It's been quite a journey! Perhaps you remember in worship nearly a year ago, when Nikki Byers read heroically the genealogy of Jesus – at least 14 generations of it, one begetting another – that oriented us to Matthew as we began. We spent two months slow-walking through the Sermon on the Mount last winter and Lent, and then through Matthew's parables this fall. Today we hear Jesus' last parable – last lesson, really, for his disciples, in the story of the sheep and the goats.

II.

Let's locate Jesus and the disciples in the story as we begin today. Remember, we're nearing the end of Jesus' life, and these are the final lessons – or “Advent parables” as some scholars call them – are the lessons he'll leave with his disciples before his death. And where the disciples are hyper-focused on when the end will come, Jesus gently yet urgently reframes their questions – from *when* to *how... how, then, shall we live while we wait*.¹

One preacher likens this parable to Jesus' final exam: “like any good exam, it is also a review, a kind of summary about what the course has been all about.”² He knew that his ministry on this earth was drawing to a close. This would be his last lesson, his parting word of instruction for those who desire to follow in his way.

For when the Son of Man comes in glory, Jesus says to his disciples, all the nations will be gathered before him, and there will be a separation: sheep on the right and goats on the left. Those on his right will inherit the kingdom, receiving the deepest abundance of God! Why?

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'*

But those on his left will be cast out, left behind, royally renounced until the end of the age. Why?

*I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,*

¹ Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p280-281.

² John Claypool, “A Ministry of Liberation,” *The Light Within You*, p94.

*I was homeless and you gave me no bed,
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.*³

And yet, with both sheep and goats, their question was the same: *when oh Lord did we see you? When did we see you?*

III.

I don't know about you, but this is one of the texts of scripture that – to use old language here – *convicts* me with its clarity and directness. It causes me to question my own actions, to wonder if I've done enough good or done the right good. It's been a while since I've visited a friend in jail, or given one of my coats to someone without one... should I get on that? Does it count if I've taken someone who's hungry to the food bank or someone who's homeless to the shelter, or am I supposed to give them my meal and my home instead? What about if someone's thirsty? Am I an enabler if I give them water every time they're thirsty instead of giving them a water bottle and directing them to a water fountain with a dose of empowerment?

Then I think of our church, what I've heard you say about how you've tended those in your care, and what I hear you say about how you want us to tend together those in need. Let's take our church's Benevolence Fund for financial assistance to those in need. Is one month's rent ok to cover, or should we do six? How about twelve? Is it better to help one person deep or a dozen people wide? How many times is enough? Or too much? Given all we've learned about mitigating poverty, and systems of economic distress, and family systems, and when helping hurts, what is the right way to do this?

³ This telling from *The Message* translation of Matthew 25:31-46.

The questions seem endless. Perhaps you can relate. And perhaps you add to the list. Perhaps you wonder how this instruction on the sheep and the goats translates to American foreign policy, or to your neighborhood HOA, or to the donations you offer helping agencies and nonprofits. How should we look for Christ the King while also following the rules? Perhaps you wonder about your own life, about the times you've been starved of belonging, dehydrated of purpose, displaced of home, exposed of shame, ill with grief, held captive by the very thing preventing you from fulfilling the deepest call to be who God dreams you to be. When is the face of Jesus in the least of these the very face we bear ourselves? Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by the need, or overlooked with need of your own, or overcome with dread that when all is said and done, despite all your best efforts, God will look at you and only see a goat. *When oh Lord did we see you? When did we see you?*

IV.

It's just a couple-mile drive from my house to Trader Joe's, the spot I make my weekly grocery run for the family. Most often I enjoy some solitude in my grocery shopping, but occasionally I take one of my children with me. And without fail, these children of mine nudge me to see who I've overlooked and respond to what I've seen. Most often this comes in the regular presence of someone seeking assistance at the Five Points intersection of Stratford, Country Club, Miller, and First Streets. I confess to you the times that whoever is present blends into the landscape for me, and I drive right past without noticing. (I have a grocery list and a time crunch, you know!) But the McGee children don't miss a beat. Inevitably, every time we go to the grocery, and they see a person standing in need of help on the way, we're adding an extra sandwich or two to our grocery cart and passing it along when we get

back to them at the stoplight. Never you mind that we did this the last time we went to the grocery, or that the person may not need food, or that I had a budget and didn't want to exceed it.

Because what I learn from my kids each and every time is their availability, even readiness, to see and respond. My kids remind me that generations ago, when Christian leaders felt compelled to identify the sins most destructive in the human life – that list we now know as the Seven Deadly Sins – they responded to this very parable with the inclusion of “akedia,” meaning, negligence or listlessness or inertia in the face of another, the equivalent of saying: “I just don't care.”⁴ Liam, Annabelle, and Silas McGee refuse akedia. They care. And they care enough to look.

“The only way to tell if they are really Jesus' eyes,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “is to look into them, to risk that moment of recognition that may break your heart, or change your mind, or make you mad, or make you amend your life. Whatever effect it has on you, that seems to be the one thing the sheep know how to do that the goats have never tried: to *look*, to *see*, to *seek* Christ in the last, the lost, the least. I'm sure Matthew would not agree with me,” she continues, “but if you ask me, that is enough to start with. The food, the drink, the welcome, the visit – all those things will follow in their own good time. They are necessary for life; they are not optional, but by themselves, they are just quarters in a cup – [good deeds completed just to check them off a list and call it done]. Charity is no substitute for kinship. We are not called to be philanthropists or social workers, but brothers and sisters. We are called into relationship, even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary, or sad. We are called to look at each other and see

⁴ Fred Craddock, “When He Shall Come,” *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p97.

Christ, who promises to be there where our eyes meet, and in that glance to teach us something we need to know.”⁵

V.

I love her take on this passage, for it calls me to the truth of Christ our King – that at the end of the day, the question is not if we did enough or if we did right, how much we spent or how uncomfortable we got, how many cups of water we offered or how many visits we made. Rather, the question Jesus asks is this: *when did you see me?* To Jesus, no matter who you are, I see you, he says. I’m with you. I’m everywhere you are; there’s nowhere you can go that I won’t be, no hunger pains or dry mouths I won’t share, no streets I haven’t walked or refuge I haven’t been turned away from, no illness I can’t feel or bondage I can’t understand.

Friends, as we transition from one season to the next, as you deck your halls and wait for the coming of Christ the Babe, as you ready your heart for Christ to enter in anew, don’t miss a chance to see Jesus. Don’t miss the opportunity to care by looking. As you nourish your spiritual life, don’t miss the opportunity to nourish our common life too. As you baptize your heart with the waters of life, don’t miss the chance to scoop up those waters of life from those who are parched of spirit or dehydrated of soul too. As you welcome the good work God has already begun in your life, don’t miss the invitation to welcome the stranger with equal excitement and warmth too. As you clothe yourself with compassion, don’t miss the opening to cover those naked with grief or exposed with loneliness. As you find healing in your body and spirit, don’t miss the summons to suffer alongside the sick too. As you are

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Knowing Glances,” *The Preaching Life*, p144.

liberated from all that holds you captive, don't miss the call to seek freedom for your neighbor too.

For Christ our King saw hunger and felt it too, saw thirst and tasted it too, saw an outcast and stood with them too, saw nakedness and stripped bare any pretense too, saw sickness and stayed close too, saw oppression and bore it too. Yet for the hungry, he became the bread of life. For the thirsty, he became the water of life. For the outcast, he became the Good Shepherd who seeks after every lost one. For the vulnerable, he walked willingly to the end of his life. For the infirm, he died their death. For the bound, he rose again for their sake. And we, little children, just wiggle and play and worry and wonder and know nothing of it, which thus confirms the words of scripture that "before we loved God, God loved us."⁶

VI.

Let me close with a story. For in a certain town, there lived a very honest cobbler named Martin.⁷ Martin lived in a tiny basement room, whose only window looked out onto the street. Of the passers-by, all he could see was their feet. But since there was hardly a pair of boots or shoes that had not passed through his hands at one time or another for repair, Martin was able to identify the passers-by by looking at their shoes.

Life had been hard on Martin. His wife died, leaving him with a young son. That young son grew, but in adolescence, fell ill and died. As you might imagine, Martin's grief turned to despair. He drank too much. He gave up religion. He stayed in and shut out his friends and sank deep into the darkness. But one day an old friend dropped by. Martin poured out his soul to his friend, and as he finished, his friend advised him: "Martin, you should do a

⁶ This references First on Fifth's practice of baby dedications, which we did in worship today.

⁷ Thanks to my mom for this story, originally written by Leo Tolstoy entitled, "Where Love Is, God Is."

little reading from the gospels each day, for light and hope will find their way back into your life.”

Martin had nothing to lose, so he figured, *why not?*, and took his friend’s advice. At the end of each day he would take down the gospels from the shelf and read a little. At first he meant to only read on Sundays, but he found it so interesting that he soon read every day. Slowly but surely, his life changed. He put away the addictions and picked back up the light and hope of good news.

One night as Martin sat reading he thought he heard someone calling him. He listened and heard clearly, “Martin, Martin, look out into the street tomorrow for I will come to visit you.” He looked around the tiny room, and since there was no one to be seen, he reckoned it must be the Lord who had spoken to him.

So it was with a great sense of excitement that he sat down to his work the next day. As he worked he kept a close eye on the window. He was looking for someone special, but nothing exciting happened. Just the usual people passed by going about their everyday business.

In the early afternoon, he saw a pair of old boots that were very familiar to him. They belonged to an old soldier called Stephen. Martin wished that Stephen would move on, for he was afraid he might obstruct his view and that he would not see the Lord when he passed. But old Stephen just stood there by the railing. Finally, it occurred to Martin that maybe Stephen was cold, and that he had nothing to eat all day. So he tapped on the window and called him to come in. He sat him by the fire and gave him tea and bread. Stephen was most grateful. He said he hadn’t eaten for two whole days. As he left, Martin gave him his second overcoat as a shield against the biting cold.

But all the time Martin was entertaining Stephen he had not forgotten the window. Every time a shadow fell on it he looked up, but nobody extraordinary passed. Yet one right after the other, Martin kept seeing folks who were struggling: a woman in ripped summer clothes carrying a baby in a threadbare blanket, a skinny boy who snuck an apple from the apple seller to eat, an angry grandmother who could never catch a break. To each, he invited them in. He fed the mother and rocked the baby to sleep. He helped the boy to return what he'd stolen and gave the grandmother a chance to sit and rest. The day drew to a close, and his house grew quiet again. Martin took the gospels down from the shelf once more. As he opened them, yesterday's dream came back to his mind. Suddenly, he seemed to hear footsteps as though someone was moving behind him. He turned around and it seemed people were standing in the dark corner, but he couldn't make out who they were. A voice whispered in his ear, "Martin, Martin, don't you know me?" "Who is it?" Martin asked. "It is I, Stephen. It is I, the mother with her baby in her arms. It is I," said the voice again, "the boy with the apple and the old woman whose twinkle had now come back to her eyes."

And Martin's soul grew glad. He began reading the gospel just where it had opened and at the top of the page he read, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in." And at the bottom of the page he read, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine. You did for me."

When oh Lord did we see you? Amen.