

# **“Lord, When Did We See You?”**

*Valley Presbyterian Church, April 7, 2019*

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 25:1-13

Matthew 25:31-46

I stayed for a couple of nights last week in New York City; the first time I had visited there in at least 20 years. Unless you spend some time in a city that size, it is hard to imagine the sheer number of people around you; on the subways, in the parks, on the streets; it seems like there are always people around. Maybe it should not be surprising, then, to see the homeless sleeping on benches and sidewalks. Maybe for someone who is around it all the time, it is not surprising, but a part of me was glad that at least I noticed; that to me it did not seem normal.

There are, of course, ways that we as the church and as individuals try to help; but we often feel powerless regarding those who come to mind when we think of “the least of these.” Maybe we don’t know what to do or where to start, and so instead we step around them and hope that in the ways we contribute to the right ministries and programs, the necessary help will come. But, the truth is, “the least of these” are not found only sleeping on crowded downtown streets, they are any person we might meet who is poor, or lonely, or hurting; anyone who is hungry or thirsty, ill or grieving, or stuck in any type of imprisonment; whether they look part or not.

Over the past few months, we have been traveling with Jesus through Matthew’s gospel, listening to stories about him and from him. This parable does not begin – like so many others, including the parable of the bridesmaids from our first reading – with the familiar words, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” Instead, this parable of the sheep and the goats teaches us what is coming; that there will be, in due time, a reckoning – a day of judgement. This may seem like a scary proposition – that everyone will one day be judged. But, what it reveals is that God cares enough about justice to stand with and for “the least of these;” and to care whether each of us have caused, ignored or tried to help.

Jesus shares this parable on his way to the cross. Though we will go back, next week, to chapter 21 to read of Jesus’ triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, today’s reading represents Jesus’ final words before the beginning of the passion narrative. The beginning of the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter reads, “When Jesus had finished saying all these

things, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’”

But before we enter into Holy Week and consider the final steps of Jesus’ journey into Jerusalem and to the cross, we consider this, his final teaching about what is coming; what God has in store for us and for the nations. In the final judgement, those who will be at the right hand of the Son of Man are called righteous. This is not because of superior knowledge or exceptional gifts; rather, it is the mercy that they have shown to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned that indicates their righteousness. In other words, their compassion – choosing to enter into the suffering of others – has distinguished them as sheep in Jesus’ eyes. Those on the right hand are told, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, *inherit* the kingdom prepared for you.” It is a gift, an inheritance; not something earned.<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus’ day, it was apparently common for sheep and goats to graze together during the day, only to be separated for the night because while the sheep had their own blankets of wool, the goats needed to be kept warm. This would not be an unfamiliar job for a shepherd, who, even in the fading light at the end of the day, would be perform this task. So, like the wheat and weeds that have grown together, the sheep and goats may be in the same pasture, but when the time comes that they have to be distinguished, it is the job of the master, the shepherd – and not us – to do so.<sup>2</sup>

The surprising part of this parable is that neither the sheep nor the goats have any idea that they have – or have not – been ministering to Jesus in “the least of these.” Both ask, “When did we see you?” Maybe if the goats knew that they were supposed to look for God in the people who were sleeping on the streets, or laying in hospital beds, or serving time in prison, they would have; or at least might have sent a servant to look for God there. And yet the sheep were just as oblivious. They simply served those who needed to be fed, or visited, or protected, or respected. They just treated people like people. It never occurred to them that they should be looking for God; and for that, they are commended.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus promises to be with and for those who are in greatest need; which means that if we want to experience God’s presence in our lives, we must look for God in the need of those who are around us; and, indeed, in our own need as well. So, the good news or the bad news of this parable is that Jesus comes to us in

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>2</sup> Dwight Longknecker, “Sheep and Goats”

<sup>3</sup> Richard Swanson, “A Provocation”

surprising, unexpected ways. If we are willing to suspend our expectations and live into this surprising reality of God, then we are invited to meet God not in some distant, far-off place, but here and now, in the real need of our neighbors; and they are invited to meet and be blessed by God as they tend to our needs as well.

This parable teaches us not only to see Jesus in the least of these, but it also challenges us to put ourselves in the place of Jesus. But which place? Do we put ourselves in the place of Jesus the judge; the one who says yes or no, thumbs up or thumbs down; deciding who gets the prize and who gets eternal punishment. It is all-too tempting to choose the winners and losers; to stick the label on ourselves, and others, as either sheep or goats.

The honest truth is that on some days we're sheep, and other days we're goats. The same is true about those people who we think are sheep of the year, as well as those we're convinced are full-time goats. None of us – as far as we can see – are completely one or the other. To be human is to be wonderfully generous, sometimes; and to be human is also to make mistakes, at other times; not doing the very things we know that we need or want or ought to do.<sup>4</sup>

Both of the parables that we hear today are about separation – first, the wise from the foolish bridesmaids; those who planned ahead and brought extra oil for their lamps and those who did not. Second, the sheep from the goat; those who served the least of these, even without knowing that by treating people like people they were serving Jesus, and those who, for whatever reason, did not. Separation; a great sorting out, will happen someday, in due time.

The other place we can find Jesus in this parable is among the last, the least and the lost. Sometimes, that is where we also find ourselves: face to face with those who, regardless of their outward appearance, are in need; in relationship, in solidarity, in communion with them. Sometimes, the pain or the void is ours. In the midst of that hunger and thirst, loneliness and pain, we are given an invitation: Jesus says, “Come, you that are blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.”

Someday, in due time, separation will come; the wise and the foolish, the sheep and the goats; Jesus will sort it all out. But for now, people are people; and we are called to treat one another that way. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> Marcia Auld Glass, “Sheep and Goats”