

THE LEAST OF THESE

Matthew 25:31-46

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on November 22, 2020, Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

A few years ago a member of the church was preparing to speak at his father’s funeral, and he wanted to acknowledge how active his father had been in the life of the church, particularly in supporting local agencies in which congregations of all faiths had united to serve the poor of the community. As I recall, the member had a vague recollection of the passage before us – where at the Last Judgment the Son of Man comes and separates the sheep from the goats – the faithful from the unfaithful – solely on the basis of the degree to which they have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, taken care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. I told him that was a common passage to use to illustrate his point, but that given the harsh judgement at the end toward those who are not found doing these things, I might pick another passage, at least for a funeral. I even recall saying that as great a passage as this is in terms of calling us to serve our neighbors, I don’t think it was one of Jesus’ higher theological moments. I suggested another passage to him, which he used to his satisfaction.

When I decided to preach this passage today – on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the liturgical year, and, as is often the case, the Sunday before Thanksgiving – I would have to deal with the harsh judgment at the end.

“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

Not a great way to end a discourse, especially one that calls for tender mercy.

Earlier this week, when I went to the commentaries to study this passage, one commentator flat-out called the language near the end “*bullying*,” saying this language “bullies the disciples into faithfulness.”¹

Another commentator argued that when Matthew wrote his gospel, he drew from several sources and scenes and discourses concerning the life of Christ, including them in his Gospel fully aware that some were *contradictory* of one another. This commentator went on to say that no one scene *exhausts* or *contains* the whole of who Jesus Christ is, no one scene is complete unto itself.

Several commentators pointed out that the overwhelming theme of Matthew’s gospel is *the centrality of the Law of Love*: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”; and that all passages therefore should be held up to scrutiny concerning the degree to which they bear witness’s to Christ’s love.

This allowed me to go onto another point this commentator was making, namely, that

Jesus Christ is present to us in his *life*

He is present in his *death*

He is present in his *appearances* after his death

He is present in his *commission* to his disciples

And his is present “*even to the close of the age.*”²

The point of his final discourse in Matthew – which contains six scenes the final of which is our passage³ – is that that even as we might await the end of history, when Christ as the Son of Man will return in all his glory, Christ is *still present with us*, when, without even thinking about what we are doing, we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the imprisoned. “In as much as you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters,” he says, “you have done it unto me.” Jesus Christ is *present*.⁴

In the course of my life in the church –

I have married people who take their meals – free – every Sunday night in the fellowship hall of a church I served

I have baptized people in the boarding houses in which they were living and in which the bed in which they were lying had become their deathbed

I have driven people to shelters and bus stations and de-tox centers and emergency rooms and mental health clinics and police stations and courthouses

I have sat across from them as they ate the only hot meal they would have that day.

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Matthew 25:46n.

² Matthew 28:20.

³ Matthew 24:32-25:30.

⁴ Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 457-458.

This is not the only way Jesus Christ has been present to me, but it is one of the most reliable ways. Though the Kingdom he brings is one of glory and radiance, though the scriptures he opens move me to laughter and tears and “Ahas” of recognition, though the music composed in his name lifts my heart, Christ is present to me, to us, as we execute love and care for the least of these in the Kingdom of this world, here and now. Jesus Christ is present.

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In Marilynne Robinson’s recently released novel *Jack*, she portrays the thoughts, feelings, experiences of an adult-preacher’s-kid gone wrong. Jack is an alcoholic. He is homeless much of the time. He has served time in prison. But he has a gentlemanly spirit, a brilliant mind, a self-effacing humility, and a love of literature which he reads during the daytime hours in the local library.

Living in segregated St. Louis following the Second World War, Jack is in the early stages of falling in love with a beautiful and accomplished Black schoolteacher named Della. Jack, who is White, leaves books on her doorstep or walks her neighborhood at night, simply dreaming of what might be. Because Jack’s father is a Presbyterian Minister, and Della’s father is a minister in the African-Methodist-Episcopal Church, Jack is at home in the church – though he no longer believes – and is drawn to a Black church one Sunday morning when he is walking the streets of the city, thinking of Della.

Having discovered that a member of the church had placed a few coins in his hat, mistaking Jack’s street-worn attire for that of a beggar, Jack enters the church to attend a service so he can place the coins in the offering plate. After the service, as Jack lingers in that awkward silence that comes over us when we are a stranger in a gathering,

A lady...dauntlessly cordial, takes him by the crook of his arm and leads him down some stairs to a basement, more specifically, a church basement, which [Jack thinks to himself] resembles everything of its kind and nothing else in the world. His heart sinks with nostalgia. Chairs and tables battered by merciless use, a frieze of child art on scriptural subjects. An upright piano. There is a kitchen, too, big pots on the stove and the smell of beans cooked with a ham bone, and corn bread. The lady says, “You sit here and I’ll bring you a plate....”

Jack says, “That’s very kind of you, ma’am. I seem to have lost my hat.” She says, “One thing at a time.” And she brings him beans and corn bread, with a promptness that seems to suggest she sees him as an emergency. He knows it is his lean and hungry look that rallies old ladies to galvanize their compassion, making him, in their eyes, a middle-aged orphan. The beans are wonderful, so he eats them even though this will encourage the notion that he is a beggar, not simply a gentleman betrayed by circumstance. The corn bread is also very fine.

She fills his plate again. All that nutrition settles his nerves. Surrounded by so much talking and laughter, he begins to feel a little conversational, though he cannot think of anything to say to anybody. He goes to the piano and touches some keys. *I would be true, for there are those who trust me; I would be pure, for there are those who care.* This comes from the heavy heart of his nostalgia, the anthem of a childhood aspiration he did not himself share.

Somebody says, “Play the song!” So he plays it from the beginning, with a few little flourishes. They clap, and one or two say, “All right!” Then someone says, “Now you play something, Miss Jones. Show him how it’s done!” That little woman shakes her head, seems to demur, then sits down and plays a most spectacular “Rock of Ages.”

“Your turn now, honey,” she says.

“I can’t do something like that.”

She laughs, “I doubt anybody expects you to.”

So he plays “The Old Rugged Cross,” not quite as he had done for those convict funerals (since he *was* in a church), but close enough. They clap and say, “Now you, Miss Jones.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve got things to do. I’ve got to get home.”

Jack says, “Yes, if I can find my hat, I’ll be on my way. And thank you. Thank you very much.”

“Well you come back anytime. I could teach you a few things.”

She is laughing, but he says, “That would be very kind.”⁵

In a segregated city, a White homeless man is taken in by a Black church, given food, warmth, music, welcome, conversation, home. “In as much as you do it unto those who are the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it unto me.” The power of Christ in the unselfconscious acts of welcome and warmth, present to the giver, present to the receiver.

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We are at a mixed time in our nation at present:

Coronavirus soaring and spreading

Lines at food banks and testing stations that appear as long as those that three weeks ago were at early voting stations

Hopeful news about the potential for a vaccine

Anxious news about resistance to a smooth and responsible transition of power

Holidays ahead with many canceling plans to travel and be with family unless, as one member told me yesterday, we are “within a full gas tank” and “they have been as quarantined as I have been.”

We are not at the end of history (unless we are), and our natural compassion is both drawn out and overtaxed at the same time; we cannot even gather in “a church basement, which resembles everything of its kind and nothing else in the world.”

Despite the harsh language of this passage, we won’t be bullied into following Jesus, because we don’t need to be.

- It is not so much of what we *believe or question* concerning any one clause of the Apostles’ Creed – “born of the Virgin Mary,” “descended into hell,” “arose again from the grave” –
- It is not so much of whether we *forgive or have been forgiven* –
- It is not so much if we can *hear* “Amazing Grace” and really *believe* it applies to us –

⁵ Marilynne Robinson, *Jack* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 160-161. Verbs in this passage have been changed from past tense to present tense.

- It is not so much if we can *pound* out on the piano “The Old Rugged Cross” and *belt* out its words from our aerosol emitting lungs –

It is not any of these things that ultimately make us candidates for the Kingdom that comes from above – whether or not “candidacy” is even the right word to describe our pre-Kingdom selves or efforts. Rather, it is the *unselfconscious acts* of welcome, compassion, care, for the least of these our fellow human beings – with emphasis on the “*unselfconscious.*” This is – in Matthew’s sorting and telling his story of Jesus Christ –is how we experience the presence of Christ this day, tomorrow, in future days, in the day of his return.

Even when we are quarantined, separated, isolated, masked and gloved and hatted and sun-glassed beyond recognition, even when our glasses fog and our masks itch, it is our *unselfconscious instinct* to care, to call, to write, to assist, to drop a book at a door, that is the presence of Christ to us, within us, among us. It is that on which we build our lives, our congregation, our family, our city, our nation, our world. That is where the Kingdom starts. That is the most reliable place it is located in this life. That is where Christ will look first when he returns, seeking us, calling us by name, welcoming us home as we have welcomed the least of these, his brothers, his sisters, his children, and ours as well.

Amen.

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