

April 7, 2019  
Matthew 25:31-46

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“No Salvation Outside the Poor?”

Good morning! It is wonderful to be back with you all after a week away in eastern Ontario visiting Marcia’s family at their farm. During our visit we saw – and smelled! – several hundred pigs, but I am afraid we did not see any sheep or goats. The passage just read does not mention pigs, so I am just going to assume that their fate, at the last judgment, is (we can hope!) relatively secure.

Today marks the fifth Sunday of Lent. We continue our worship this morning in a spirit of confession and repentance, acknowledging the ways in which we fail to love God, one another, and ourselves. Our passage for today sets confession and our acknowledgement of our own sin into sharp relief. As we have been going through the entirety of the Gospel of Matthew since Christmas, we have seen the prominent place that Matthew gives to the teachings of Jesus. The radicality and the severity of Matthew’s portrait of Jesus and his teachings have been on full display as we have examined and reflected on the call of discipleship, its challenges and its risks for a life that is to be lived fully and faithfully, not apart from the world in a peaceful serenity, but amidst the tumult and turmoil of a world that still groans for freedom. The parables of Jesus judge us as they confound us – they call us, implore us to take seriously the concrete activity and presence of a God who is full of grace and truth, as well as severe judgment; and they push us, especially in this season of Lent, to take full stock of *who* we are and *where* we are in relation to this God, this Poor One, this One who is, we confess, in the particularity and singularity of his life, the very movement of God’s grace and truth, and the embodiment of the kingdom that comes from heaven and that moves among us on our earth.

The parable that was just read, in particular, can be understood as both the sum and dramatic culmination of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. It stands at the conclusion of the fifth and final teaching of Jesus. It is his last formal act of teaching, his parting lesson, the cumulative moment in his teaching ministry. It is also something of a summary of the major theological themes raised in Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, presenting us with this radical juxtaposition of the image of a triumphant Jesus, reigning in royal glory and majesty, as king and judge at the end of time, on the one hand, and the image of the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned unwelcomed Poor One - the royal Son of Man is nothing other than the Crucified Nazarene who remains in the *present* in and among “the least of these” – indeed, who *simply* is, in a very important sense, “the least of these.”

Notice how the parable begins with a victory hymn to Christ set in the future: “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” (Matt 25:31). The same Jesus who had “nowhere to lay his head” (8:20), the son of a migrant family, is now pictured as seated on the royal throne as king. The same Jesus who was accused of being an agent of Satan (12:24) is now revealed as the Lord of history. The same Jesus who was rejected in his hometown (13:54-58) is now the one who stands a judge of the nations. But what is most significant is that as Lord and king, he nevertheless *remains* and *persists* as the Crucified One, as the One who is cast out, unwelcome, imprisoned, sick, poor, hungry, and thirsty.

The parable portrays Jesus as king, but also as a shepherd who at the end of time will separate the sheep from the goats. Jesus, the one judged, now as the Son of Man, pronounces judgment on all. For

the sheep, this judgment is good news – as it is revealed that theirs is the kingdom of God. For the goats this judgment is bad news, as their condemnation is revealed. These are stark images, metaphors that draw a very sharp binary between the righteous and the unrighteous, the faithful and the unfaithful, and their respective fates. It would seem that there is no middle ground for Jesus – you are either in or you are out, either for Christ or anti-Christ. Here in Matthew 25 we are presented, we might say, not with a generically universal judgment and grace, but a *differentiating* judgment and grace.

Those on the right hand, the sheep, are called blessed and will inherit the kingdom for they are where Christ is, precisely in their service to and solidarity with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. And on the left hand, the goats, are condemned because they are in service to and in solidarity with the oppressors – in their rejection of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, they have made themselves, quite literally, anti-Christ. Here, in his last teaching, we are encountered with a terrifyingly radical direct identification between the ongoing presence of the body of Jesus Christ and the oppressed of the earth. And, here, we have what is perhaps *the fundamental* teaching of Jesus: the good news that the presence and activity of God is to be discovered among the poor, the wretched, and the sick, among the least in the eyes of the world. “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,” Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are . . .” (1 Cor 1:26ff).

The Latin American liberation theologians spoke of this reality of God’s identification with “the least” as “God’s preferential option for the poor.” Oscar Romero, the martyred pastor of El Salvador, maintained that “Among the poor Christ desired to place his seat of redemption” (Homily of December 24, 1978). And drawing on these passages and out of involvement in the people’s struggle for freedom, theologians Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, concluded that “there is no salvation outside the poor.” You see, new life, liberating life, life in the Spirit, is to be discovered, again and again, in our concrete involvement in the lives of the “least of these.” For the church that seeks conformity to Christ, that seeks to follow Christ in an unjust broken world, that seeks to be *one* with his body on earth, this church must itself become freely oppressed, making the struggle of the little ones for freedom their own struggle. This is not a matter of merely extending a hand from a distance, nor is it merely a matter of having sympathy for those who suffer injustice, it is matter instead of *discovering our collective identity* in the God who is present and active in the lives of those who struggle for a new and just world.

But does this not undermine the *inclusivity* and *universality* of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Does this not fall prey to a dangerous, binary mode of think that does not allow *everyone* a place at the table? Does this not, in a sense, short-circuit the grace of God that extends even to the unrighteousness, the unfaithful, the sinner? Are we not all oppressed in some way, equally sinners and saints? Does this not turn the gospel into a new works-righteousness such that we must earn our way to salvation? And does this not rather problematically place fear of God and God’s judgment as the central motivating factor for conversion and discipleship? These are important questions to ask, and I do not want to side-step them. But I think we must first ask *why* it is that we so quickly want to pose them in the first place, and from what *social* position are these questions generally posed? Is it out of desire to justify ourselves and our lives before God and others, to secure our own innocence, and to justify our own

social interests? Is it out of a desire to justify our wealth and power, and the comfortability of our lives? Is it because we desire a grace that can be had on the “cheap,” to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s phrase, a grace that does not cost us anything that leaves us fundamentally unchanged?

It seems to me that Jesus’s answer to this question, according to Matthew 25, is that the universality of the gospel, the inclusivity of God’s grace is one that comes *through* an encounter with the *particularity* of the Poor One of Nazareth, from whom redemption and salvation is finally for *all*. Our encounter with this Poor One, which only happens in our encounter and genuine involvement in the struggle of the poor, the migrant, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner, this just *is* the means by which we are both judged and *converted* to the great expansiveness of God’s grace and mercy. In this sense, it seems to me, there is no salvation outside the poor.

The point of our passage is not that the wealthy must now live in shame and guilt with their heads down, awaiting their sorry fate. The point is rather that freedom is now a possibility, new life in the Spirit is a possibility *through* fellowship with the body of the broken and beaten and hungry and thirsty Christ. It is the good news that history can and will be changed, it is the good news that our identities are *not* static and essential to who we are – white people, for example, are now set free from acting in the interest of white power; straight people are now set free from acting in the interest of heterosexual power; cis gender people are now set free from acting in the interest of anti-transgender agendas; men are now set free from acting only in the interest of male dominance and patriarchy.

An encounter with the gospel of the Poor One reveals to us that our identities are constructed and their power depends on our ongoing alignment with them. But the gospel of the Poor One is also the good news that we can become traitors to these identities and the power they hold over us and the violence they perpetuate onto others. This is truly good news, for it is the news that life and love is possible for all God’s children because a *new world of love and justice is being birthed* out of the body of the Poor One of Nazareth and the Poor Ones of this world; it is good news because it is the announcement that beauty and creativity and new possibilities are expressing themselves in ways that are unimaginable to those of us whose lives depend on the rejection and the refusal of “the least.”