

WHEN DID I SEE YOU?

Matthew 25:31-46

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Every time we hear a story and the frog turns into a prince or the haggard looking woman transforms into her true princess self, we say to the characters in the story, "You should have known that was coming. You didn't really hear and understand their words. You didn't come close to seeing who that person was. You should've known, Belle. You should've known, Beast. You should've known, frog kisser. That always happens at this point in the story."

And still, the characters find themselves surprised, even if we are talking at them from our side of the screen. They are surprised every time the frog really does turn into a prince and every time someone who appeared to be of little use to them becomes seen as the key to their future. "How could you not have known? Frogs don't talk. Of course the frog was going to become a prince! That always happens at this point in the story!"

Matthew 25.31-46 (NRSV)

³¹ "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. ³² 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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ 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; ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.' ³⁷ 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? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ 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,^[a] you did it to me.' ⁴¹ 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; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.' ⁴⁴ 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?' ⁴⁵ 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.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Today's text from Matthew 25 is part of a response to a question. Well, sort of. Back in Matthew 24, Jesus' disciples had asked him about how they would know it was the end and Jesus was about to return. Matthew 25 is made up of three parables about the end, when Jesus comes again to reign. The first is of the ten maidens, some of whom were ready to meet the bridegroom and some who were not. The second parable is about a master who entrusted three servants with his money. You'll remember that two received commendation, promotion, and blessing. The master said to each of them: *"Well done, good and faithful servant!...Come and share my joy!"* You'll remember that the other servant received condemnation and punishment, for he had been lazy, afraid, and fruitless.

The parable of sheep and goats is the finale of the three parables and easily the most difficult to hear. The images of people as sheep and God as a shepherd are *common* in Scripture. We heard it this morning in the call to worship: "the Lord is our God, and we are the sheep of God's pasture." But when listening to this parable closely, most people begin to spend time with a very uncomfortable question: Am I a sheep?

Some of the last words of Fred Rogers, famously known as Mr. Rogers, were to his wife Joanne, his trusted confidante. Even Mr. Rogers reportedly asked his wife, shortly before he died, that very question: *"Am I a sheep?"*

It's clear that this parable is not meant to be a Disney story. It's a bit more "Grimm". In fact, this parable doesn't seem like make-believe or just a story. This parable feels a bit too real. This parable is unrelenting. It sticks to your insides. You might ask, *"Shouldn't we feel that way? Many people need relief and all need the gospel. Feeling the weight of that might mean that we've truly heard it. There is great need..."* And you would be right.

The need stays with us. Not only the weight of need but the weight of the surprise ending also stays with us. The story gives a jolt because, until now, everyone seemed on equal playing field ... until now, when the separation begins. Some are called to the right hand side, the blessing hand side. They are called sheep and *marvel* at their status. Some are on the left hand, where the opposite is received. They are called goats and marvel at *their* status.

Sheep are surprised; the righteous sheep seem downright oblivious that they were righteous. Don't you think so? "Who me- did I serve YOU, Lord?" They don't seem the type to flaunt how many prison visits they have done. Rather, they are surprised: "Lord, when did *we see You?* We were just living as You taught." The sheep are either not overly concerned with their own righteousness or not overly aware of it. There is a good chance that they are aware of their own *lack* and more aware that they must trust in Christ's sufficiency.

The goats are surprised, as if they were almost totally unaware they were *unrighteous*. "Me? The devil and his angels? No, Lord, I was just living my life. Did you hear me just call you 'Lord'? I mean, I didn't even see you!" It seems the goats didn't know the part about the first being last. They seem to have sold themselves on a life, possibly even a religion, that praised success and didn't even see Jesus' brothers and sisters.

It seems that this parable was told with only the disciples gathered around Jesus. *If* the religious leaders of the time *had* been listening, they might have thought that Jesus was calling them goats, first of all, they might have been right. Second, it might have explained why the next thing they tried to do was kill him. The next thing that happens in Matthew, at the beginning of chapter 26, is: the chief religiosos meet together and plot to kill Jesus. Jesus' hard words stuck to the religious leaders, and they wanted to be rid of them. Unfortunately, the next actions of the religious leaders seem only to confirm the truth in the parable.

Maybe this is *not* a parable we come away from feeling good about. After all, you don't know the end until the end, and there are two different endings with the guarantee of a lot of surprise. It's a text that may wrestle us our whole lives. And in the end, we each must ultimately trust in the mercy of Christ. Right now, we are left to wrestle with the big questions this text seems to ask. *So, for now, we listen to what the text says, we pray through it, and we wrestle with it.*

Let's start with what seems obvious. The text seems so clear on several things. OF COURSE, the vulnerable should be cared for. And, OF COURSE, the sheep were surprised. They probably didn't sit around thinking about how great they were.

As you know, today is Reign of Christ Sunday. Of course, as Christians we acknowledge not only that Christ WILL reign but Christ does reign in the here and now in us, and we seek the greater influence of his reign of goodness, love, and justice. It's my educated guess that somewhere along the line, these sheep responded to the message of Christ and then began, above anything else, to seek after the reign of God and let God have full freedom in their lives, even if it cost them.

Then the goats. OF COURSE, the response of the goats is unacceptable. We know that. First of all, they talk back to Jesus. Secondly, it is clear that they gave no earthly attention to those who really mattered. The NRSV Bible we read says simply, "*You did not do it*" - another translation (NLT) says, "*you refused*"...as though ignoring or *not doing* is a little more *willful* than *benign*. The text begs of the goats, "Who do you see but pretend you don't? Who do you conveniently ignore? Because how you've treated someone less powerful than you has said more than how you've treated your supervisor --or how you *think* you've treated God." In the NRSV, which we heard together, it's simply an omission. The goats might think, "I didn't feed the hungry, but I didn't *hurt* them. I just didn't do anything to them - frankly, I was minding my own business. When did I see YOU, Lord, and not help?"

What is clear here is this excuse. *The truth you and I know* is that it is hard to NOT see someone who's hurting or vulnerable. You can learn to not see, but it takes effort. Saying we didn't see the vulnerable would clearly be a false cover. But seeing the vulnerable and refusing to look at them ... ignoring them *would* be the easiest way to miss the fact that God was present.

During my first semester of college, I went with a group on a trip for a few days to downtown Calgary to be immersed in inner city ministry through experiencing life at a homeless shelter. We wore the same clothes all week. We slept on the floor. We listened to the homeless. But for me, the most eye-opening experience was the afternoon our facilitator asked us if we would be willing to panhandle, even though it wasn't technically allowed by the city, and to experience for just that hour what it was like to need to ask for your basic needs to be met by the kindness of a stranger. He set us off in groups of two or three. So my friend and I sat on a busy corner of downtown Calgary with an empty hat and for an hour looked up at faces passing us by, discovering that the people were unwilling to look down. Not only did people notice us, but they pretended that they didn't. After only a few minutes, it felt more than terrible - it felt dehumanizing to be ignored. We didn't really need money, which is good because we didn't get a penny, but I was 17 and sitting on a street corner in clothes I'd worn for days, and no one passing by would even look at me.

Jesus will hear, "Lord, when did we see You?" But some things here in Matthew 25 are very clear, and excuses are some of those things. It is hard *not* to see need, and it's only when you refuse to see need that you miss seeing God's presence in it.

It's also clear that this text is about human-to-human interaction, and the surprise is how very much it has mattered. This text reminds that our lives *are* spiritual. Who we train ourselves to see and not see is a spiritual decision. Choosing to reach out and risk

well or choosing not to are each spiritual decisions -- the consequences, Jesus says, eternal. Your days are not just filled with what you do and the people you see or pass by. The surprise is that God is also in your day. God is present *in* the daily things, and an awareness of God needs to be at the center of them, the driver of every interaction, every - spiritual - decision.

Those truths are clear in this parable. What is also clear is God's presence. We know that Jesus didn't tell parables just to tell stories or entertain. Parables are stories about God, but also, Jesus told stories in parables so the people listening would realize -- *I'm IN this story too!* Of course, realizing one's place in the story can be an experience of vigorous waking. So too, can realizing that God is in *your story* and that God has always been in your story. Therefore, it *all matters*, beyond just each passing moment.

As Christ's followers, we *are in* this parable. We might assume that our role in the parable is to see the sheep and care for the vulnerable. We already know that we will always be called to serve the vulnerable because Christ identified himself with poor and exploited people. And we would be correct. But let's go back two steps for a minute and see one more role we may not have seen -or chosen- for ourselves.

Besides the sheep, the goats, and Jesus, there are two other groups of people who are main characters. There are the gathered nations and the vulnerable "least of these."

Let's start with the gathered nations first. The phrase here is translated, "*all the nations*," or "*all the people of the world*." Who are they? Was Jesus concerned with "all the nations" anywhere else? Yes - in fact, this is the same phrase that is about to be used in Matthew 28:19- when Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of *all nations*." "The nations" are the ones we are called to disciple. We're called to go to all the nations...that will be gathered. And it may go without saying, but America doesn't get a fast pass through the sheep line. You can't buy that kind of fast pass anywhere.

Every tribe and nation will be gathered - with no qualifiers; all the nations... The same people we are called to disciple! We must realize that this is a story about missions. Jesus followed this parable with a vulnerable death, powerful resurrection, and a clear charge to go to "all the nations" to make disciples. *These* are the nations - the ones we are called to.

Matthew 25 is such a significant text that we use it as a framework for understanding our work of mission as a church. In fact, at a denominational level also, there is new energy around becoming "Matthew 25 churches" in response to the clear message that we find in this chapter of sharing the love of God. Because we *must* go on the mission

of sharing the good news with everyone, sheep and goat alike, knowing that some will receive the message and trigger the heavenly celebration that a new member of God's flock has been found. Are we ready to be called to them?

Secondly, who are the sick, the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the imprisoned? Who are "the least of these" and who are "Jesus' brothers and sisters"? Again, looking *earlier* in *Matthew*, we can read Jesus' own words about his family and the least. Matthew 12:49: "49 And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"

Then in Matthew 10, Jesus calls these disciples, his brothers, to a mission to "go... to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." As he sends them, he says, "39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 40 Whoever welcomes you welcomes me ... 42 And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded."

Might *we* also be the vulnerable? Who are the vulnerable here? Not only the ones who need the water, but the disciples - those Jesus has claimed as his family- who must not seek to find their life but lose it for Christ's sake and find it anew. What if- it's *both*? That we serve the least of these, the vulnerable, *and we are* the vulnerable?

In fact, many Bible scholars *agree* that this parable does *not* speak primarily of the world's treatment of the poor *but* of its willingness to receive the gospel and its messengers who come in weakness and vulnerability, who suffer. Things like hunger, thirst, sickness, being a stranger in a new place, being imprisoned. How the people of the nations have received the sick, hungry, imprisoned, *vulnerable disciples* who witnessed among them will determine their fate forever. Read in light of what Jesus says elsewhere, what *if* this text is about our mission, not *only* to the nations and their vulnerable, but to the nations *as* the vulnerable?

Will we be held accountable for how we've treated the vulnerable? Yes, we absolutely will. Will we also be held accountable to *be* the vulnerable in order to expand the message of the gospel? ...

For Jesus' disciples, living out the implications of this parable would almost certainly be costly. They would have had to *have* a treasure of great value to be willing to give all they had for it, to be willing to *become* vulnerable for the sake of Christ and the nations. Are we willing to carry the weight of another; to touch dirty hands, that we might pray with people; to give up the privilege of choosing gourmet meals for the sake of having more to share with another who needs both Christ and food; are we willing to endure

discomfort for the sake of the urgency of finding Jesus' sheep; to experience loss for the sake of knowing Christ and joining him out in his world? Things like hunger, cold, discomfort, *vulnerability* - aren't things we often allow ourselves to feel. But I wonder if we would be willing to feel those things for the privilege of sharing the best news we've ever heard.

Jesus risked *everything* and became the vulnerable. You can go home and read what happens next in Matthew. And after Jesus' death and resurrection, we see the disciples who listened to and lived alongside Jesus give up comfort and financial security willingly. From not only the life of Christ but the lives of the faithful who came after Christ, we see the pattern that the *gospel* is hardly about self-protection or family insulation. It is only because of Jesus' example that we can find the courage to become vulnerable and share the gospel.

From the life of Christ, we also see that our gospel is not a power stance. We go boldly and live by the power of the Holy Spirit, but it's not manipulative or abusive. We go with the strength and friendship of God's own Spirit, yet we go to our neighbors and to the nations vulnerably, inviting them. We represent Christ the king, but we come as a lamb. Because if we want people to *hear the message*, we must help them to *see Christ* by becoming as he became.

Remember back to the beginning? Jesus didn't answer the disciples' question after all about how people will know it's the end. Jesus told them stories about how to live in light of the end, how to let the end and beginning meet in the middle -- the now. What would that look like? What does it take to get to "well done!"? At the very end, we believe and we count on the grace and mercy of God as our only hope. But in the meantime, from now to eternity, Jesus asks, rather, are you living as my disciple, *making* disciples, and expanding my family? Are we living on earth as it is in heaven, so that when people finally come before the resurrected Christ, they will have had every reason to see us, hear our message, and welcome us in?

At the end, the scene changes and people are revealed for who they truly are. And upon that revelation, the future is also revealed. Choices have been made. The frog turns to a prince or the prince turns to a frog. There are sheep, there are goats. Many are surprised. So until that moment, may we vulnerably go, boldly love, freely invite. May we not be left only to say, "Of course - how could you not have seen this coming?"

And may the goats have no earthly reason to say, "Lord, I heard the Christians, but ... *when* did I see You?"