

**Matthew 25:31-46 - “O God! It’s YOU Again!?”**

- Pastor Mike Pancoast

There should nothing surprising about the poles of Jesus’ parable here. In fact, don’t we have a certain expectation, maybe even some satisfaction in the glimpse Jesus gives us here into what the End Times will be about, even if He doesn’t give us a clue about the timing? Don’t we expect that someday, at some point justice will be served, that the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished? .

There is nothing surprising about the sheep who live in this world with a compassionate disposition toward others, especially those in need. Through the actions of the compassionate the hungry are fed; the thirsty are quenched; the stranger is welcomed; the needy are clothed; the sick are looked after; and the imprisoned are visited. There is nothing surprising that after the laundry list of compassionate deeds, Jesus calls these sheep “the righteous,” that is “those who are right with God:” “*Then the RIGHTEOUS will say...*” (v. 37). We should EXPECT compassionate people to be called “righteous.”

Where we should be surprised—and probably even more than a little unsettled—is where the characters themselves are surprised.

On the one side, the compassionate are themselves surprised by the weight attached to their deeds: “*When was it that we saw YOU, Jesus, in such straits?*” It seems that their service, their compassion, their disposition toward others was so every-day normal, that it doesn’t even occur to them that their kindnesses could ever have been a personal service to Jesus himself or even that they had done anything worthy of reward. They had been so shaped by something or somebody beyond themselves that they were surprised by the fuss that was made.

On the other side—where the goats were—they too were surprised by virtually the exact same circumstances: “*When was it that we saw YOU, Jesus, in such straits?*” Now the problem is NOT that the sheep are inherently predisposed toward righteousness and the goats toward callousness. It’s not that symbolically or otherwise, goats are intrinsically wicked or evil. (For example, in the orders God gives Moses and the children of Israel for the Passover, the sacrifice can come either from sheep or from the goats.) There’s nothing wrong with goats, per se. But in this separation in judgment between those called “righteous” and those called “accursed,” the unloving were labeled as such NOT because their actions were particularly wicked but because their IN-actions were so unthinking, their daily lives so turned inward, their spiritual lives so unphased—perhaps their plates were so full, as we might describe our daily lives—as to not connect Jesus with love of their fellow human being or to ask of them any up-front deed of compassion.

There once was a woman who was particularly burdened by homeless beggar in the area. Everyone knew him. He’d show up on a street corner with a bundle of newspapers and spray bottle of Windex panhandling by offering to clean windshields...sometimes cleaning windshields without even offering. Sometimes he’d be seen on trash days wandering through the alley before the garbage men collected the contents of the cans, picking out items of unknown use and value to the bum. Sometimes he’d show up with a few stray coins for a cup of coffee at the fast food places. No body knew where he came from or where he went each day, but everyone who considered themselves fine and upstanding agreed that he was a nuisance. After one particular day of seeing, it seemed, the bum at just about every place she went and being especially fed up with his annoying intrusions into her nice, decent sense of order and propriety, who should appear first in line as she opened the roll-top serving window at the soup kitchen at which she volunteered with her son for confirmation? “Oh God!” she said, “It’s you again!?”

The word *compassion* itself simply means “to feel deeply connected with.” THAT’S what is at the heart of Jesus’ parable—not even first and foremost a whiny exhortation to say to you and me, “*You know, you*

*really should feel more connected with the poor, the hungry, the needy, & the imprisoned,*” per se, as true as that may be. What is at the core of the parable, first and foremost, is a revelation of the heartfelt connection of God with this world, especially with this world’s darkest and most forsaken quarters. What is at the core of the parable is that not only does God have any sort of connection whatsoever with us human beings who are so skilled both in visiting all manner of destruction upon each other AND in simply maintaining a sterile, uncaring disconnection from each other, but that God feels deeply connected with, that God holds a miraculous compassion for human beings. And that compassion is revealed most clearly in the Shepherd by whom the sheep are called and named, in Jesus Christ, a compassion that is revealed in pathos of the cross, in the intentional standing in our place in that time of judgment both for our intentional wickedness, as well as for our callous disregard. It is only then from this standpoint—of God’s compassion for us in the intentional mission of Jesus Christ and him crucified and raised from the dead—that we can then wonder in our goat-worthy hearts and minds, “What then can I do?”

We are being invited this month through our reading and study of Matthew 25 to ask and to wonder with intention that very question: “What then can I do because of God’s great love for me—a love I know through the cross and a love I know through the blessings of my daily life?” Last week, Pastor Ken invited us to be invited into the abundant usefulness into which God seeks to draw us and all creation. This week, God seeks to draw our hearts and minds into a compassionate response—one in which we see a direct connection between our faith...between what God has given us, our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of God’s gracious love...and between the world around us.

Following World War II some German students volunteered to help rebuild a cathedral in England, one that had been badly damaged by the Luftwaffe bombings. As the work progressed, they weren’t sure how to best restore a large statue of Jesus with arms outstretched and bearing the familiar inscription, “Come unto me.” They were able to repair all the damage to the statue except for Christ’s hands which had been completely destroyed. Should they even attempt to rebuild these? Finally, the workers reached a decision that still stands today. They decided to leave the hands off and changed the inscription to read: “Christ has no hands but ours.”

THAT’S the difference between being callous and being compassionate—to know and to believe that what we offer makes a difference in the world...to know and to believe that WE make a difference in the world...to know and to believe that Jesus Christ makes a difference in the world. The tools we have been given...our selves, our time, our possessions...our buildings—they are not for us alone but for the feeding of the hungry and clothing of the poor, not just those with a gnawing feeling in their bellies and the steely sting of cold on their skin, but even for those who have a gnawing feeling in their hearts and the steely sting of isolation in their lives: to know and to believe that Jesus Christ makes a difference in the world...to know and to believe that First Lutheran makes a difference in the world...to know and to believe what we offer makes a difference in the world: THIS is the compassionate life of faith, fully integrated with the daily world around us. AMEN.