

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
November 19, 2023
Matthew 25:31-46

“Thank You”

Every year I visit the doctor for no apparent reason. That is, I make an appointment, take a couple hours out of my day, sit in a waiting room, and then have a physical exam in order for a team of medical professionals to measure my health. It’s not an entirely comfortable experience, and I confess that I often want to avoid it. However, I know that avoiding the doctor is not good for me, so I go. And when I’m done, I get a complete picture of my overall health. In the areas where my health could be better, I make adjustments. If I get a warning sign that prompts more tests, I take them. If I get a good bill of health, I make a mental note to do more of the same. Either way, the checkup could save my life, and my insurance company thinks this is such a good idea that they pay the bill.

In many ways, Matthew’s story about the last judgment is like a wellness check. Its purpose isn’t condemn or scare but to provide a snapshot of our overall religious health, development and learning that should lead to new habits and ways of life. So, how are we doing as followers of Jesus Christ? More specifically, how are you doing as a follower of Jesus Christ? Will you make it in line with the sheep, or . . . are adjustments necessary to avoid the goats? And if the story frightens you, you should pay attention to that and make makes changes to your life, because those changes could save your life. After all, just like our doctor wants us to be healthy, so does our Creator, Redeemer and Judge. God really does want us in line with the sheep, not the goats. (*“Feasting on the Word”, Year A, Volume Four, Proper 29, Lindsay P. Armstrong, Homiletical Perspective*)

On this Sunday as we near the season of giving Jesus lets us know in no uncertain terms that we will be judged by what we do or, as the case may be, by what we don’t do. It’s that simple. We’re called to serve those in need, not to ignore or overlook or make assumptions, but to look into their faces, see Christ and help them. And if we don’t, there will be

consequences. In the words of James Forbes, "Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat," said Jesus, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

To follow Jesus means to care for the vulnerable. There's no other way. He says that our judgment in the next life will be based on how we treat the poor in this life, because how we spend our time and whom we actively love and do not love provide a diagnostic image of our overall health.

It's the third of three stories Jesus told his disciples during the last week of his life, and given the nature of all three stories, it's clear Jesus is trying to prepare his followers to continue on without him. You might conclude that these stories are a summary of his teaching, this one in particular. It's judgment day, and All the nations of the world are there. Jesus is the judge: and he's separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep are the righteous ones: they inherit the kingdom of God. The goats are treated harshly— "depart from me," he says. The point here is not the symbolic imagery of eternal fire but what is actually happening. There is a judgment and people are accountable to God for the way we live our lives.

According to Jesus, the criteria for judgment are simple: "I was hungry and you fed me; thirsty and you gave me drink." "When did we do that, Lord?" the righteous ask. And the unforgettable answer: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

And then the counterpoint: "I was hungry and you gave me no food; thirsty and no drink; a stranger and you did not welcome me; naked and you did not clothe me; in prison and you did not visit." "When, Lord? We don't recall any of that happening. We didn't see you hungry, thirsty, cold, and homeless. If we had seen you like that, believe me, we'd have been there, right there with you." And then the clear, devastating indictment: "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

“What you do for and to the least of these—the sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, and imprisoned, you do to me,” Jesus said.

What we do to them, we do to Jesus.

In these familiar words are two profoundly important ideas.

The first idea is that God isn't a remote deity living on a throne up there in the clouds or living out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. God is here, Jesus said, in the messiness of life. God is here, particularly in the face of the person who needs you. God is in the face of the homeless man I see just about every day in our Courtyard; he's in the face of the people we serve meals to at the Rescue Mission or St. Josephs. You want to meet God? Sign-up to help at either of those places, and you'll meet God.

The second profoundly important idea in this story is that it doesn't matter at all what we believe; what matters is what we do. Your theology, your creed, even your baptismal certificate – none of that guarantees us a spot in line with the sheep. You want to avoid the goat line? Sign-up to make a meal for the women at St. Joseph or the Rescue Mission – today is a good day to start. But doing it regularly will garner you a better a place in line.

Jesus tells us plainly and simply that the essential difference between the sheep and the goats is the care they showed for other people, especially people the world considers “the least of these.” And friends, God loves “the least of these”. So much so that many theologians would argue – do argue – that God is biased, even prejudiced. Far from being neutral or impartial, they argue that God does play favorites by bestowing special favor on the dispossessed. And the Lord asks us to do the same.

And in case this has shaken your view of God, or offends you, this isn't a new idea. It's a prominent theme throughout Scripture.

In his best-seller, *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis tells a story about how he and a group of friends doing field work in inner-city Chicago became interested in what the Bible has to say about poverty. So they did a study and discovered that one of the defining characteristics of Judaism, is the attention it pays to the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, and the stranger. The heart of the

law is Deuteronomy 15: "Do not be hard-hearted toward your needy neighbor; rather open your hand." Psalm 82 is a prayer for the poor, weak, and orphans. It's built into the Israelites social and political structure, even agricultural policy: a corner of every field is to be left unharvested so the poor have something to eat. Wallis and his friends also discovered that one out of sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor and care for the poor. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), one out of ten verses is about poverty. In the Gospel of Luke, it's one out of seven. Wallis and his friends were shocked.

And perhaps we are, too. Stunned to learn that we are accountable not so much for believing the right doctrines, belonging to the right church, or espousing the right opinion on social issues, but by the way we treat the poor.

The theologian Tertullian wrote how God had a "peculiar respect" for the lowly, and that caring for the poor was the "distinctive sign" of believers. Even the pagan emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363), who vehemently opposed Christians and stripped them of their rights and privileges, acknowledged the Christian preferential option for the poor: "The godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours."

In his book *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (Yale, 2013), Gary Anderson notes that Christian care for the poor isn't just a utilitarian act of social justice (any number of non-profits can do that). Rather, care for the poor is "the privileged way to serve God."

In other words, we reach out in compassion because that is the natural thing to do to show our love for God. To see Christ in the least of these is a natural extension of the grace God has granted us. We give ourselves to others because God gave God's self to us. It is that simple.

The contemporary theologian Letty Russell echoed these words when she said, "We welcome the stranger, the outcast, the downtrodden, the least of these in our world . . . not because it's a nice social thing to do, but because first we have been loved by God."

Being a person of faith means practicing our faith, and we practice our faith by serving all of God's children, but most especially the least of these.

On Thanksgiving Day, many of us will sit down at tables flowing with the bounty God has provided, but some will not. As you sit down at your table, remember the have-nots, for Christ dwells in them. But do more than remember. Take action.

Do something to help others and to serve the least of these. Do something big, or do something small, but do something-every day. It is the best response we can make to God for the many blessings we have received from God's hands. Do something to serve others and remember that Jesus didn't ask any of the people he helped for a list of their qualifications, he just helped them because that was the business he was in, and it is the business to which he calls us.

As children, we are told to count our blessings. Many families count their blessings as a tradition on Thanksgiving Day. But this year, take it a step further. After you count your blessings, do something with them. If you're thankful for your health, vow to help someone who is not healthy. If you're thankful for your family, promise to spend time with someone who is lonely. If you're thankful for the food that graces your table, promise to help someone who is hungry; if you are thankful for your warm home, vow to help someone who is cold and without shelter.

"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.

Amen.

