

**Behind Door #1**  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher  
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Matthew 25:31–46

Today, on Christ's Reign Sunday, today's scriptures tells of the time when the Messiah will separate the goats and the sheep; separating the faithful from the not so faithful through their actions. No one knows what is about to happen and it appears everyone is surprised by it.

**Matthew 25:31–46**

“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.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Television came of age when I did. I am the product of the generation who welcomed TV into the center of the home before there was a realization that just maybe too many hours in front of the TV is harmful to a child’s development! I am a textbook case of a child who spent many hours of my formative years mindlessly watching TV sitcoms, game shows and soap operas. I am glad to say that I am a bit more discerning now. Every now and then the influence of those years of unmonitored TV watching seeps into my consciousness. We call it binge watching now!

It should not be too surprising that when I saw today’s Gospel lesson, the game show *Let’s Make a Deal!* came popping into my head. Maybe that’s a stretch for some of you, but speaking as member of the TV generation, not entirely off the wall!

Many of you may know about that game show, it is still on with Wayne Brady as host. The version of 50 years ago went something like this: people made complete fools of themselves hoping to be

noticed by the emcee. They would dress up in embarrassing costumes and jump up and down and do things that no rational person would do, at least no Presbyterian would think of doing. All this activity was for the ultimate goal, which was the opportunity to pick one of the three doors displayed on-stage. Behind one door is an array of fantastic prizes. That chance to pick one of the doors causes people to move beyond their comfort zones. The emcee would tantalize the contestants by revealing what was behind the other doors first to see what they missed before they got their prize. If, the person picked the door which had the grand prize there would be crying and rejoicing and hugging as the music played and the host would wave to the unseen audience in hopes that we, the audience, would tune in again to see another go round of ultimately finding out what is behind those hidden doors.

One thing that was certain was that what we saw on TV was the culmination of a long road for each of those contestants. It was a road of choices, decisions and priorities that led those folks to be in the audience with their ridiculous costumes and antics in order to get what they ultimately wanted. Long before the cameras started rolling and before we were settled down before the TV set, great deals had to be in place for a contestant to end up choosing a particular door in hopes of the grand reward.

Even if the last act of choosing the grand prize is chance, very little up to then was simply fate or luck. A number of years ago there was a couple who made lots of money, giving people advice on how to be selected for game shows. I think they wrote a book about it. There is certain perkiness and a strategic place to be in line that increases one's chance of being selected. Our attraction to short cuts and getting around the system gave this couple their 15 minutes of fame.

Now how does this fit into the Gospel lesson you may ask? The stakes are far higher in the Gospel of Matthew than in *Let's Make a Deal*. Our eternal life is far more serious than discovering what is behind door #1, but bear with me, there are some connections. First, like the game show, this passage is not a starting point but it is at the end. Like most stories, there is a back story to finding the Messiah separating the goats from the sheep. This scene of judgment is found at the culmination of our lives. To get the perspective of this passage we need to back up and discover what has brought us to this point and the choices that have been made along the way. We keep looking for short cuts, but ultimately, they really don't work. We try to find ways to place ourselves in the best light and the way to get the most impact and notice for the things that we do. When we reach the point of reckoning in our lives, the short cuts do not help.

We have the capacity to play many games with ourselves on the way to this final judgment. In our daily actions and choices, we justify and rationalize our actions even to a twisted point of absurdity, all in the hope to be ultimately noticed and rewarded.

Matthew writes about the people who are gathering before the Messiah. The people come in expectation. People who have prepared for this moment and who desperately want to be noticed are standing there and they think they are ready. This is the moment. It is not the whim of the TV emcee but the mighty judge who will do the selecting. The people there are standing with a lifetime of actions behind them.

As the judge separates the righteous from the unrighteous, the sheep from the goats, both groups are surprised at the selection process. They are perplexed as to how things have turned out. The

ones who are rewarded are surprised that what they have done through their lives has merit at this moment. The ones who are cast aside are equally shocked. They assume that they too will be rewarded. They believe that they will receive the big prize. After all, haven't we all noticed how good they have been? But they are left wanting.

Our lives, like the game show, involve many factors. Some things come to us without our doing anything; like where we were born. We are born in a country that provides more opportunities than other places. We take a bigger share of the resources than other places. What makes us different from the folks in Sudan or Syria is the chance of our birth and the result of those who came before us. We have more opportunities more resources to share, because of that we also have more responsibility. We know that not everyone succeeds but by where we are born and the color of our skin, we have a greater chance for a better life. There is not an equal playing. It is skewed in our favor.

Being born in a country of affluence increases our temptation to think we deserve what we have. It fosters the tendency to be self-absorbed to protect ourselves so that we are not "aware" of the sick, the hungry or the weak. Our beginnings may be the chance of the gene pool but what we do with that is our choice.

We choose whether or not we see the face of Christ in all whom we meet. We choose to live a life that is open to hear the plights of others. We choose whether or not that we see what we can do to be part of the community, rather than to isolate ourselves from all that is hard, hurtful, or ugly. These are decisions we make daily. We make them so often that we are not always aware that we do.

Sometimes we make better decisions than other times. Sometimes it is easier to pass by the homeless person on the street than to take the time to see him, or to notice the plight of others. Sometimes it is easier to talk with and reach out to the friend than it is to a stranger. Sometimes it is easier to dress up or even go through absurd charades in order to do what others expect from us rather than to reach down and look into our souls.

The basis for our choices comes not from the expectations of others, but from the conviction of what God has done for us. Christ has given us a new life. That is what grace is about. Christ has given us a chance for the big reward of God's Kingdom. Christ has given himself so that we can live a life filled with hope and new promise. Based on what comes from within, we can see the potential of Christ in the eyes of our neighbors. We have the ability to see Christ in that curmudgeon living down the street, and that street person who we pass by.

Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, receiving the stranger are not actions that are imposed upon us externally so that we look good. Doing these things comes from within. It comes from knowing that Christ has indeed feeds us when we are at our hungriest; Christ welcomes us when we have felt lost and alone. Reaching down into our depths and finding God is in our life allows us to respond by reaching out and connecting to the lives of others. The temptation is great to isolate and to remove ourselves, but when we do; we then remove the opportunity of God working in our lives and in the lives of others.

When did we see you Lord? It is hard to see the face of Christ when we only look at our face or into the face of those who are just like us. Lord, when did we see you hungry? When we remove

ourselves from the needs of others, we do not see hunger very clearly. Putting on blinders to the differences among us removes us from our interaction with our God.

You know all about this. You wouldn't be listening this morning if you hadn't thought about others in need. As people of faith, you know that we look out for our neighbors and help the stranger. But sometimes we don't know how to go about doing that. To go and seek others and address their needs is a huge and difficult task. That is what makes this time so difficult. How do we do it? How do we find ways when we are too far apart to reach out?

A few months ago, I got an email from Cathy Meis, Executive Director of Loaves and Fishes, which is a local free meal program for anyone who needs it. A small faithful group from Oak Grove have been supporting Loaves and Fishes by preparing meals to serve. Now with COVID-19, they are distributing meals through takeout. Their site at Creekside is closing at the end of the year. Cathy was wondering if Oak Grove would be interested in hosting the site. Now this is the last thing that an interim or transitional pastor wants to even think about. Diving into a long-term mission project is not in the interim playbook. But the need was not for when a new pastor comes, the need is now. I would not say yes, but then I would also not say no! Through gathering a small group and weighing the pros and cons, going through our Presbyterian ways of committees to session then to committee again our answer is a modified yes. We will be hosting the drive-up site five days a week until we open up again. How can we say no not here, when people need food? How can we turn away the face of Christ who does not know where their next meal will be? Will it be inconvenient and cause some disruption some logistical problems?

You bet. Will we see Christ in the faces of children and adults waiting in their cars for something to eat? Yes!!

There will be a time when we will be accountable. That is what Matthew tells us. By God's grace, we will stand before the throne and God will say, "Look what you have done for me." and we will not be surprised but will reply, "Of course you have been there in my journey. Yes, of course you have been part of my life and the lives of all who I have encountered along the way. Sometimes I can only see myself but by your grace, Lord, I have been able to recognize you in the eyes of others." There will be many tears of joy and hugging and celebrating and jumping up and down. For it will be true that we have chosen the correct door, we have selected the right path that leads to God's kingdom. The grand prize is: abiding with our God is greater than we can imagine. But I am jumping to the end of the story. In the meantime, we all have a way to go before we get there. Today let us think about the choices we make for it is our day-to-day living that leads us to that door which reveals God's kingdom.

Praise be to God. Amen.