

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
November 20, 2022
Matthew 25:31–46

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.
Send your Spirit among us, O God, as we meditate on your love.
Prepare our minds to hear your Word, move our hearts to embrace
what we hear, and strengthen our will to follow your way. This we
pray through Christ, our Savior. Amen.

“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.”

As we have moved through the book of Matthew over the last several months, we come to one final parable. Over the last many weeks, we have heard these parables told by Jesus, stories that he offers as glimpses of the kingdom of heaven, and of what it means to be a disciple. Throughout them all, there has been a message that following in the way of Jesus, holding fast to the kingdom of God, should have a transformative impact on our lives. That is, knowing what the kingdom of God is, there should be a response from us that shows evidence of this understanding of God’s kingdom.

I know I have openly expressed from this pulpit over the last few weeks that I have struggled with these stories that Jesus tells as recorded in the book of Matthew. I have. Like any good story, these stories that I thought were so familiar and straightforward, actually are a little more complex, not so tidy, not so familiar. Perhaps it has been a good indication of what it is to be a Christian, and to follow in the way of Jesus. Not so tidy, not so simple, more difficult than I thought.

Today's story of the sheep and the goats is no different. In one of my study bibles, this parable is titled, "The Last Judgement." It's as if those that study scripture, and that have named the various stories in them want to give us a clear heads up, this is it, this is the last warning you get.

This story comes as Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem and to his eventual death. Jesus is headed toward the end. And so, we get one final story compelling us to act as if following Jesus matters.

And while this is a complicated story like many parables in Matthew, many mainline churches really like this story. We like it so much, there is an entire denominational initiative named after Matthew 25. This initiative, of which Oak Grove is a part, focuses on three areas: congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating poverty. This story resonates with us because we know that when we serve "the least of these," we are serving Jesus. It gives you a warm feeling.

And I've given the "be like the sheep" sermon before. One of the very first sermons I ever delivered was on this text, and I made it about me, or made it about individual discipleship. About how, if we really want to follow Jesus, we should serve those in need.

But the context isn't about an individual, and some scholars argue its not even about the community of faith. The story begins with all the nations gathered before God. The term nations often refers to the "Gentiles," those outside of the faith community. It suggests that God isn't only concerned with those that are part of the faith community, but that all people are a concern for God, and that all people are a part of God's flock. Perhaps this story is an indication to the community of faith that we should be careful about how we judge those we might think are outside of God's care. Perhaps it is an indication that God also cares about those who do not profess faith in God, and specifically cares about how they care for those who are most vulnerable.

But there is a word of judgement here. And maybe that is why we tend to just talk about the sheep and serving Jesus by serving the least of these. That is a little more comfortable. But when you read the complete story, you cannot get away from God's judgement.

I was once amongst a group of friends who were all pastors, and we were having a good theological discussion and the topic of judgement came up, and I said something to the effect of, if I believe in an all-loving God, and I do, I just have a hard time thinking about God as being judgmental. To which one of my pastor friends replied, "Have you read the bible?"

We don't talk much about judgement in the mainline church, but perhaps we should talk more about it. A former preacher from Riverside church talks about God's judgement as separation from God and from one another. She talks about this separation as the things we do and the systems that we participate in that hurt other people, that diminish our relationship with God and with each other, that harm our world and our fellow human beings.

This makes more sense to me than some transaction understanding of sin, that God is the judge of some cosmic balance sheet. You get points for this, a point for that.

“If you dance or drink, you get certain demerits, and then if you bring your grandmother flowers, you get more (positive points).”

I think that our lives are formed and ordered by the relationships that we build and nurture both with God and with each other. This same preacher says the other trap that mainline church people fall into all the time is we think that claiming our own banners of belief is somehow oppressive to other people, which is flatly untrue. We’re not doing the world any service if we can’t fully express what it is we say we believe and what standards and convictions animate our work in the world.

If the church doesn’t stand up and speak up and act in the way of Jesus, then I don’t know why the church continues to exist. This is a commitment that Oak Grove believes. As we have gone through the discernment process and affirmed those things that are important to our understanding of what it means to be a church, the call and commitment to social justice is clear. We have also demonstrated a call to helping the least of these – of providing food, shelter, clothing, and comfort for those who suffer – we do this in our giving to other organizations and in the many hours serving with organizations. And we recognize that work must be done to change the things that create the need in the first place. Even as we seek to alleviate immediate suffering, we work toward righting wrongs and dismantling unjust structures and systems.

Karl Barth, a prominent theologian and professor of the last century, once reminded the “pastor and the faithful” that they are not just a religious society. “They live in the world,” he said, and still need both “the Bible and the newspaper.” He believed our theology should speak good news into the world and its situation. He was the primary author of the Confession of Belhar, which is one of the confessions of the PC(USA) and which was a statement written in the 1930’s that rejected the influence of Nazism on German Christianity. Part of the Confession says,

Confession of Belhar

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. We believe that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We believe that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker. We believe that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

We believe that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We believe that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged. We believe that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interest and thus control and harm others.

It's fundamental to our faith that as we seek to follow in the way of Jesus that we speak to the issues of our day, issues around which Jesus was passionate: inclusion, equity, justice, and peace; making room for the least among us and welcoming the stranger; extending

the reach of our communities to include those who can't survive on their own.

Some of have suggested that when we do this, we are just talking politics and that politics has no place in church. I often hear this statement around election time. Author and preacher John Pavlovitz says that, “embedded in the reprimand is the myth that there is somehow a way of being *spiritual* without also being *political*.”

The only problem with such suggestions, is that if you are a committed person of any faith tradition, life *is* the lane. It's *all* spiritual stuff. Faith isn't an isolated activity that we engage in between many other non-religious activities.

When we talk about:

Eliminating poverty, caring for the planet, ensuring equity for *all* people, confronting bigotry, caring for sick people, avoiding war, those are all issues of faith, and they are issues in political life as well. Faith is the lens through which we look at these issues. Our faith informs our lives. It should make a difference. Not so that we can get into heaven, but rather, so that we can be in right relationship. So that whatever we do in word and deed, we are doing for the glory of God. Because God cares, particularly how we care for others. And God judges how this is manifested and recognizes that when we are not caring for the least of these, we are far from God. Nothing will separate us from a loving God, but God absolutely cares about how we treat others. Kosuke Koyama, a retired theology professor, has said, “In the context of human history, it is by the kindness of strangers rather than justification by faith that the Church would stand or fall. Has not exclusive

emphasis on the doctrine of justification produced an easy religion?”

Following Jesus is not easy, and it permeates everything. Being a disciple of Christ is not about being a part of an easy religion. Being a disciple of Christ is about being aware and intentional about living one’s life in a new way. It is about radically loving and risking enough to extend hospitality to the stranger.

And when we get it right, we will be known by our love. Amen