

Reigning Compassion – The Reign of Christ

Matthew 25:31-46 Michael Barrett

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Today, we celebrate the Reign of Christ and consider what that means.

When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne.

To help us understand today's incredible words we need to place them in their context which means going back to the start of Matthew's 24th chapter. The disciples come to Jesus, privately, and ask, *'tell they say, when will all this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age.'*

Within the gospel of Matthew there appear five discourses or extended dialogues [the Sermon on the Mount 5-7; the Missionary Discourse 10; the Parables 13; the Community Discourse 18; and then finally, the Eschatological or Judgment Discourse 23-25]. Lately, we have journeyed together through much of this last discourse. In response to the disciples questions Jesus identifies certain signs, warns them of persecution, and confesses that neither the day nor hour is known by anyone except the Father. Jesus has speaks of the need for watchfulness, in a parable about salves he extols faithfulness, in a parable about bridesmaids he exalts hope, and in a parable about talents he acclaims resourcefulness.

Today's reading is the final words of Jesus' last discourse. From here in Matthew, the next stop is the cross. Some hear the words sheep and goats, think metaphor, and assume another parable. The king is Jesus, the sheep are those who listen to the word of God and do it, the goats are the ones who listen to the word of God and do not do it, and the kingdom, of course, is eternal life. Sounds simple, yet with Jesus that which seems simple bears deeper consideration. Today let us consider first, the priority of the metaphors Jesus uses, then the importance of the six specific actions he names, then the similarities and differences between those 'goats' and sheep'; and finally, the issue of judgment.

If this is indeed a parable, it is certainly one of Jesus' most famous, but doubtfully on anyone's all time favorites list of his resounding tales. Aren't we all a whole lot more comfortable with the Samaritan helping out the

crime victim or the father running out to greet the wayward son, or that shepherd risking all to find that poor lost lamb? This parable stings – it makes most of us very uncomfortable.

It brings to mind the words of Mark Twain, *‘It is not those parts of the Bible that I do not understand that bother me. It is the parts of the Bible that I do understand that bother me the most.*

And it all begins with the image of the King, the Son of Man, the Incarnation of God, Jesus sitting on his throne – JUDGING.

Let us begin with that imagery of sheep and goats. These related ruminant bovines are not the most important focus of the story. Jesus uses a required herding activity that every one of his listeners would have immediately grasped.

In the evening, shepherds separated the sheep from the goats because the sheep, with their warm wool jackets could stay out in the open-air fields. The goats lacking appropriate cold weather apparel need to be taken inside a barn to be kept safely warm. It’s the separation that Jesus wants us to turn over in our minds. It is relatively easy to differentiate sheep and goats. The tails of Sheep hang down. The tails of Goat stand up. Jesus does not want us engrossed in the distraction of trying to figure out if we are a sheep or a goat. Most of us at this point are somewhere in between.

What separates our characters are six compassionate actions – feeding the hungry, providing drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, clothing the shivering, visiting the sick, and visiting the prisoner.

Notice first – these are all actions – they are deeds – it is not just about attitudes or feelings – “I feel so sorry for those starving people” – it is not about advocacy – “The government, the state, the church, should do something about this problem.” It is about doing something directly. This reading is the mantra of our own Mercies Team. If you’re worried about direct action along these lines join up with the Mercies Team.

The beauty of the actions Jesus has listed is that they are democratically very doable – young/old; men/women; republican/democrat; black/white; rich/poor; gay/straight, etc., almost any of us can accomplish these. It takes willingness. It takes some sacrifice. But please note Jesus does not say start

by, ‘buying the hungry one a farm or drilling a well for that thirsty person or building someone a house or turning someone loose with a \$5000 Macy’s gift card or break the that prisoner out of jail.’ Collectively some of those actions are possible, but not feasible on the individual basis. Today Jesus is talking to us as individuals. Little actions mean a great deal to God.

Are these six the only good actions? Probably not – they are illustrative not exhaustive and they are representative not comprehensive. But, they are simply the best place to start.

To whom do we direct our efforts? *Whenever you do one of these things to someone who is overlooked or ignored . . .* The weak and the vulnerable. The least of these. The least of my brothers or sisters. Sometimes this passage is translated as ‘to the members of my family,’ which some take as restricting the application to Christians only. The problem with that interpretation is first when Jesus spoke these words there was yet no Christian Church to focus these actions upon in restriction. Secondly, Jesus perceived his family very broadly – Matthew 12:50 and Luke 8:21.

In the Jewish tradition of Mitzvah – stooping to help someone – it seems great emphasis is place on the giver’s anonymity. There is of course times and places and people for which that is the best. But, here Jesus argues as well that there are also times and places and people that best giving involves personal relationship. Last Wednesday, several members helped served a meal directly to some of the least. There was just something about handing that meal to them and expressing recognition of each as a child of God.

Sometimes it seems our God is a God who likes to hide. Sometimes He hides right here in the woes, chaos and despair of life. He hides himself behind the faces of the destitute and in places of suffering. Jesus is telling us that God is not just in beautiful sunsets and starry skies and great fellowship and baby births. Look for him there, but also look for him in the overlooked and ignored. Our God is a God who loves – he gives us the gift of life so in turn we may respect the life of others. He gives us the gift of love so we may care for others. He gives us the gift of freedom so we may place concern for others above worry about our self.

This morning Jesus tells us to love is to live.

Did you notice a similar irony between the sheep and the goats today? Their perceptions were the same, but their actions were different. Both were surprised – both salvation and punishment were a surprising discovery. Both ask, *when did we ever see you?*

Again, the importance to Jesus of deed. The sheep simply responded to the need around them. In a sense they were unaware. They were not calculating or expecting. They were not hoping for distinction or award. They were not trying to get on God's good side or trying to earn favor with God or avoid punishment or insure eternal rewards.

Their deeds were righteous because their love for their neighbor was authentic, genuine. Loving our neighbor just to get into heaven isn't real love – it's selfishness. Some people become so preoccupied and worried about getting into heaven that they forget to spend time actually loving their neighbor -- the one thing that's sure to get them there. Confessing faith in Jesus, being thankful for God's grace, appreciating justification, the relief of forgiveness, and the importance of repentance are all significant, but there is ultimacy to God's command to love.

The goats did not respond to the need around them. In a sense they were unaware. They weren't concerned about a wayward child or bandaging a beaten up crime victim or searching for a lost lamb. It never occurred to them that God might be hiding in a raft full of refugees or some elderly person in a rest home or in some body rotting in jail or a starving child in the Sudan. So they did nothing in terms of embracing a suffering world.

That's what Jesus looks for. When we embrace a hurting person it shows that the love of God is indeed living inside us and its outward evidence is the difference that it is making in the lives of those in need around us.

Judgment. Jesus tells us we are accountable. And this accountability is less about punishing wickedness than bringing the world into a just balance. That longing for justice that characterizes so much of Christian endeavor is hard to define and harder to put into practice – but we continue trying, for that longing comes from God.

There's a whole lot of hell talk in Matthew – he tends to use the language of violent punishment more than any other evangelist. 7 out of the 13 New Testament mentions of hell are from Matthew. If you add the phrase

‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ the ration rises to 13 out of 20. One may wonder that if one continually choses to live a life divorced from the love of God and the love of neighbor if one has not simply dictated their separation by their own choice. For most that separation would be hell enough.

The Gospels use very picturesque language. Love is the image of a Roman centurion asking for the healing of a boy slave or a child crawling into Jesus’ lap or a father running wildly to welcome home a son or a Samaritan anointing the wounds of an enemy. Heaven is pictured as a garden or a city – sometimes with pearly gates and streets paved with gold. Hell is depicted as a smoldering trash heap, a lake of fire, or complete darkness.

There are several important messages that are easily lost if in this reading we choose it to become overwhelmingly preoccupied with concerns about eternal life at the expense of performing loving actions in this life. Some concepts:

Justice – the quality of being fair, impartial, moral, honest, and reasonable.

Judgment – to form an opinion by careful weighing of the evidence, to decide, to assess, to review, to analyze and to critique.

Punishment – to impose a penalty, to chastise, to castigate, to chasten, to discipline, and to correct.

Torture – to twist, torment, to wrench out of shape, to distort or warp, to strain, to crush, to burn, to wound, to inflict pain, to abuse or maltreat, or traumatize, and to agonize.

Punishment and torture are not the same thing.

Would a loving God exercise justice? Yes.

Would a loving God exercise judgment? Yes.

Would a loving God exercise punishment? Yes.

Would a loving God exercise eternal torture? No.

Would a loving exercise patience, forgiveness and compassion? Yes.

Would a loving God exercise healing, generosity, and understanding? Yes.

Would a loving God expect reigning compassion from us? Yes.

Would a loving God expect us to exercise love? Yes.

Is there an easy way to distinguish goats from sheep? Yes. God wishes to reign His compassion on us and through us.

Goats break hearts.
Sheep awaken hearts.

Amen and God Truly Bless you.