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### **The Least of These**

*Matthew 25:31-46*

*31“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. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then 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; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then 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? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And 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.’ 41Then 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; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I 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.’ 44Then 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?’ 45Then 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.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

On baptism days, especially when young children are being baptized, I think about the world they are inheriting and the kinds of lives they will lead. What will be their challenges, their triumphs, and who will be in their circle of care and community. What global issues and concerns will arrive at their doors to impact and shape their lives.

For Oliver and Dominic, I know their parents will guide them as far as they can. I officiated at both their parents' weddings as the McCay family's official chaplain, so I know of the love that will fill their homes. And for little Enzo Marcel, our grandson, I know the family and community across two countries who will keep an eye on him and support him.

It our hope that these three boys will know a world that is kinder, more just, and more peace-filled than it is today – and that they will find that they and we have a part to play.

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln was purportedly asked if God was on his side. He famously replied: “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side, “my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”

Lincoln's words are reminders for any and every generation if they might wonder if they have God's blessing and approval for where they stand, what they do and who they care about. Be careful. God has a couple of ideas of God's own.

God is not a partisan -- we claim and profess. Yet, in trying times, it can be hard not to become convinced that deep down God supports the causes and people and concerns close to our hearts. We are -- God knows -- human after all. Yet Jesus himself somehow resisted getting pulled into the most intense political questions of his day as his people were suffering daily under Roman occupation. On Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday before we begin the Advent season, we know that the only crown Jesus would ever wear was a crown of thorns at the cross.

Throughout the Bible if it ever looks like God is taking sides and tipping the scales it is for what purpose and for whom? To lift up the dignity of those the world would pass by and overlook or exclude. The list of the favored should be familiar and repetitive to us: the poor, the widow, the child, the despised, the rejected, the stranger and foreigner. Jesus tipped the scale towards the underdog again and again. The outsider looking in, the down and out trying to work themselves back into community.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lifted up the poor, the meek, those who mourn, and hunger and thirst for justice, and the merciful and peacemakers, and those who suffer. We know this. But how do we turn this imperative from becoming the nice background music playing throughout the Bible to a constant tune that guides our walking and living? When we don't think twice about the right thing to do.

I admit that for a baptism day, Matthew 25 is not the most ideal gospel. The Final Judgement. The image before us is Christ the Son of Man on the throne in heaven and all the angels showing up with all the nations gathered and then he starts separating -- the sheep from the goats. The sheep are in, and the goats are out. Forever it seems -- eternal fire and punishment.

This gospel reading confronts and confounds much of the work we may have done to imagine and respond to a universal, expansive, inclusive, and generous God. For many of us have come to believe and hope that all will be welcomed into God's big tent loving embrace: saint and scoundrel alike. Today we come across the fine print.

Those of you who hear me preach often will know that I believe much of the work we do here is to reclaim religion and the Christian faith from the past. From bad theology, the overweight influence of untethered and shady TV preachers on society, and memories of rogue parochial schoolteachers who may have used a stick and firm hand more than they should have in days gone by. Religion and faith, when not cared for and centered on love and compassion can go off the rails and do more harm than it does good.

Today's vision of the Final Judgement is one way to get the heart of the gospel. It is a lesson that parents and godparents can teach their children to see what is essential in knowing than anything else.

Those who first heard this story probably thought they were close enough to Jesus to have known when he had been hungry, thirsty, a stranger, without clothing, sick or in prison. How could they have missed that? And then the twist that must have made their jaws drop: 45 '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.' It was me, Jesus was saying, but you and others often fail to see.

I have heard a paraphrased version of this story that goes like this.

For I was hungry, and you were well-fed and happy;  
 Thirsty and you were watering your lawn;  
 A stranger and you called the police and were glad to see me taken away;  
 Naked and you were saying: "I don't have a thing to wear;"  
 Ill and you asked: "Is it contagious?"  
 In prison and you said, "That's where your kind belongs."

Where do we find ourselves in this story?

For me, it is the separating that always gets me.

Separation is one of the harshest states and punishments one can hand down to another. Separation causes pain, isolation, loneliness, and often desperation.

Children separated from parents. Parents from children. History is filled with the tragic accounts of the indigenous people of this nation being torn away first from their land and then from their extended families. African slaves, first separated from their loved ones, who survived the cruel Middle Passage only to be torn away and separated from anyone from their tribe or region so they could not communicate with one another against their masters.

This time of year, more than others we often think about those members of our armed forces stationed far away from home.

Maybe this deep human fear of being separated inspired the apostle Paul to write to the church in Rome that God will not inflict pain disappoint as the world often can. (Romans 8:35-39). Some of the most striking words in the New Testament: v. 35: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? And then Paul lists everything he can think of...V. 37 Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And we have Matthew 25 – the foundation of the Social Gospel. At the very least, the idea of being separated and slotted for eternal punishment would have gotten the disciples' attention. Pay attention. Be careful. Get this one thing right.

The world is in a difficult place. It always has been so, but we have not known the scale or the details in real time.

And there may be no magic formula to heal and repair what has been broken and stressed to breaking points. And maybe that is the point.

We've heard many Kingdom of God parables over these last few months as we will soon turn to the season of Advent and preparations for Christmas.

They are reminders that the kind of life that Jesus was preaching and teaching about more than the world we know. This Kingdom is not able power, castles and armies and gilded royalty. It is, as it turns out, about the "least of these" getting God's attention and wanting us to notice and act to build a more Christ-like world. It is always much more than "thoughts and prayers."

To worship and serve God is to serve one another.