

November 26, 2017
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

In the End

Finally, we have come to the end. We have come to the end of Jesus' parables about the end. The end is about to come for Jesus too here at the end of Matthew's gospel. And in the end, the disciples will have to learn to be the church without him. But in the end, in the end of everything, Jesus will be the judge of whether or not they succeed. In the end, he will sit in judgment over them and over all the nations. In the end, Jesus tells them their success will be judged by how they treated the vulnerable and the least of these.

As we have been reading chapter 25 of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been telling his disciples that the end will come and that they should be prepared for it. Jesus has been telling us, his church, about what to do in the future while he is away. We are to be like watchful servants, ready for him to appear to any moment. We are to be like bridesmaids, with extra oil to keep our lamps burning. We are to be like slaves entrusted with the master's possessions, not sitting on what we have, but making

the best of it until he returns. Jesus has been warning his disciples again and again about the end and that we need to be ready.

Today's parable is Jesus' final parable about the end. It is the climax in the series. It is about the end of everything when God will call all people in to account for themselves. In the end, there will be a day of Judgment. And on that day, Jesus says, everyone, all the nations will be gathered before him. And all the angels of heaven will be there. And there will be the Son of Man sitting on his throne in all of his glory. In the end, it will be quite a scene of cosmic power and divine awesomeness. And we are meant to be both comforted and cautioned, that in the end, it will all come down to one thing; whether we treated the vulnerable as if they are Jesus.

On the one hand, there is comfort in this parable. Especially for those who have suffered. There will be justice for them. In the end, everyone, all peoples, all the nations will be called to account for how they treated those without. The nations, *ta ethne*, they are called in Greek. These are the great empires and ruling powers of the world, the Romans, the Persians, the Egyptians. A few scholars say that the followers of Jesus

were a miniscule part of that world.¹ And in the first century, they were the vulnerable ones. They were the hungry and the naked and the sick; and the powerful nations could persecute them at will. But in the end, there would be justice for them. There would be consequences for those who ignored the suffering of God's people. It was comforting to know that the powerful would have to answer for what they did or didn't do. Maybe we have wished for that justice too. Maybe we have wanted to know that someday, the people who ignored us or refused us or forgot us or shortchanged us would get what they have coming. It is a comfort to know that in the end, God will make things right for those who suffer in the world. For the family devastated by drugs, we want justice. For those shoved aside because no one likes their kind, we want justice. For those ignored by society because they don't have the money, we want justice. For those doing without medicine or shelter or a way out or a way up, we want justice. And it is a comfort to know that God wants that too.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3477

That God sees those who suffer. God identifies with them. God is one of them. What you did to the least of these, you did to me.

But on the other hand, it's a cautionary tale because what if we are ones ignoring the vulnerable? What if we are the ones who COULD act or speak for others and we don't? What if there is JUDGMENT for us? We don't like judgment. I don't like judgment. Judgment is the reason I dislike other judgmental Christians. But in the end, God's judgment is necessary for there to be justice. For there to be justice for all the earth, for all the people, for all of creation, God must have the final say. God must make things right.

The day will come. And in the end, the world will be judged and it will be judged by how it treated the vulnerable. And again, on the one hand, that's very comforting. Because God is telling us here what God expects. And in the end, it is not something miraculous or spectacular. We don't need to need to be a missionary to outer Mongolia. We don't have to build a great big marble cathedral. We don't have to offer 1000 animals up for sacrifice. We don't have to write a best-selling book that explains the mysteries of faith; or take a stand for our beliefs before the Supreme

Court. All Jesus expects us to do is feed those who are hungry, give a drink to those who are thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the imprisoned. It's nothing fancy. It's simply caring about others. And it doesn't require lots of money or special qualifications. We will be judged faithful, if we have looked after the least of these.

It is comforting that faithfulness is so simple. But on the other hand, it's a cautionary tale. Because Jesus doesn't just tell us to care for people in need. He says to care for people in need as if they are HIM. As if HE is the hungry one, the thirsty one, the stranger, the naked, sick, or imprisoned. This is where he will be, he tells his disciples. This is where I am, he tells the early church. "When I leave, I won't be gone. I will still be there with you. I will always be with you. With the vulnerable. This is the whole point of the gospel of Matthew. From the very beginning in chapter 1, Matthew tells us that Jesus came to be Emmanuel, God with us. He came as a baby, a hungry, thirsty baby forced to hole up in a manger because there was no room in the inn. He had to flee the wrath of King Herod as a refugee and live as a stranger in Egypt. He grew up to care for the sick and was always found among the

poor. Then he was imprisoned for threatening the powers that be. He was sentenced to die, stripped of his clothing and put on a cross to die. Then buried in a borrowed grave. When Jesus was among us, he lived as one in need. In today's parable, Jesus promises he will always be with us. In the same way he always been. As someone in need.

There is a story by Leo Tolstoy about Martin the cobbler. Martin's wife and his children had died. Martin was all alone. One night, God told Martin that he would visit him the following day. In the morning, Martin was so excited. He prepared food and drink and fixed up a warm fire. Outside his window, he saw his neighbor shoveling snow. He looked cold, so he invited him in for a warm drink and they talked about faith and family. The neighbor thanked him and left. Martin got his house back in order and he looked out the window again, hoping to see the Lord. Instead, he saw a woman with a baby. They were both shivering. He invited them in and fed them and gave them warm clothes. The mother thanked Martin gratefully and left. It was growing closer to evening. Martin was determined to be ready to welcome the Lord. Then he heard shouting outside. A boy had stolen an apple from a woman's

apple cart. Martin ran into the street. He calmed the fighting pair. He paid for the boy's apple and a second one for the boy to take. He begged the woman to forgive the child for the sake of Jesus. He was just a boy. The woman confessed her children were gone and she missed them so. She was about to leave with her cart when the boy offered to help her push it. 'I'm going the same way, ma'am,' he said. So the woman nodded and the two went off together. Martin went back inside his home. He waited until late in the evening but still, the Lord did not appear. Disappointed, Martin went to bed. Then Martin had a dream. In the dream, Martin heard the Lord speaking, 'Martin, did you see me today? Did you recognize me?' Martin was confused. "When, Lord? When did I see you?", he said thinking he had missed the Lord while he was helping others. Then the images of the neighbor shoveling snow, the shivering mother and child, and boy and the woman with the apple cart came to his mind. "That was me, said the voice. Each one of them was me."

In the end, we will see that God has been with us all the time. And in the end, God will judge us by how we treated the vulnerable. And in the

end, we will not have to look up to find God. We will only need to look around. On the one hand, that's comforting. That God will always be right here with us. Closer to us than we can imagine. Available to us. Visible to us. All we need to do is look around. God is not up in the clouds. But right next door. That's what Jesus is telling his disciples and his church. They can always meet him. They can always serve him and honor him by serving the ones in need.

But again, there is also caution here. Because who would expect the Lord to be so close at hand? Who would expect the Lord to be the neighbor in need? Lord, when did we see you hungry or naked or in prison? When did we see YOU? Because if we had seen YOU, Lord, we would have helped YOU. If YOU were hungry, we would have emptied out our fridges to feed you. If YOU were thirsty, we would have turned on our taps and given you all the expensive Midway water you could drink. If YOU were naked, we would have given you all the clothes in our closet. If YOU were sick, we would have visited you every day in the hospital. If YOU were in prison, we would have come and emptied out our pockets and gone through the metal detectors and been buzzed

through every locked door to visit you. But we didn't see You, Lord. We didn't see you.

No, you didn't, says Jesus. You didn't see me among the least of these. But that was me. I was the elderly person living alone. I was the single mom at the food bank. I was the man working two jobs to take care of my kids. I was the homeless person without a warm coat. I was the undocumented immigrant. I was the one without clean drinking water. I was the one passed from foster home to foster home. I was the one who came to school with yesterday's clothes on. I was the one in need. In need of mercy.

We encounter Christ every day. And we serve him when we serve our neighbor. And in the end, that is how we will be judged. By how we acted when we thought God wasn't around. So, every day, we must act as if Jesus is around. As if God IS with us. And treat others with compassion. And act as if those in need could be Jesus himself. Because in the end, that's what will matter. Love is what will matter. Only in heaven, said Mother Teresa, will we understand how much we owe the

poor for helping us to love God like we should.² God is with us always.

That is the comfort and the caution of our parable today. That the

Kingdom of God is here. And we can be part of it now, at this table.

Here, God invites all who are in need. God invites all who are hungry or

thirsty or sick to come. Come and be fed, be healed, be freed from sin

and clothed in righteousness. For in the end, God will make all things

right.

² Dan Clendenin, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>