

“This is Who We Are”
Matthew 25:31-46
Nibs Stroupe
Christ The Ruler Sunday
November 26, 2017

We have arrived at the end of the church year, and we’re now asked to get ready for the coming church year. It begins next Sunday on the first Sunday in Advent. This last Sunday in the church year is usually called “Christ the King” Sunday, and the lectionary readings for this Sunday generally move to the “end of time” texts, emphasizing that Jesus Christ rules over all people and all of history.

In these days when the depth of patriarchy is once again revealed to all of us, I want us to shift the idea of the masculine being the “norm.” When Caroline and I were pastors at Oakhurst, we changed the name of this last Sunday of the church year to “Christ the Ruler” Sunday, with Jesus being both the head of life and the measure of life, the ruling stick of life.

In Matthew’s gospel, today’s parable is part of a series of the last teachings that Jesus gives to the women and men who follow him. After this he will be betrayed, arrested, and executed. In the beginning of this 25th chapter of Matthew, Jesus starts this series with the parable of the ten bridesmaids waiting on a bridegroom, who has been delayed. Five of them keep their lamps trimmed and burning, and they were ready for the bridegroom and the feast. You can hear that refrain from the great gospel song: “Keep your lamps trimmed and burnin,’ keep your lamps trimmed and burnin,’ the time is drawing nigh.”

Last week’s Gospel lesson in the lectionary was the second parable in this series in Matthew 25: the parable of the talents, that strange and quirky story that many have often used to justify capitalism. The master goes away and leaves his servants in charge of the talents. Two of the servants invest the talents and make more, but the third buries and hides his talent. When the master returns, he is delighted in the talent-makers, but he is greatly irritated with the talent-hider. “Use your gifts for God, don’t bury them.” It seems to call us back to the Sermon on the Mount earlier in Matthew: “Let your light so shine before other people that they may give glory to God,”

And now in this third parable in Matthew 25, Jesus seems to want to tighten things up. He wants his disciples in every age, including us, to live in the “now” of God, to glorify God with our talents in the here and now. And, it’s almost as if Jesus knows how we will twist the parable of the talents to make it about capitalism and making money. He wants to make it clear here in this third parable what these “talents” are. He wants to make it plain: what are the talents to use to glorify God? In this third parable, Jesus indicates that the talents are not capitalism but rather these: feeding the hungry, giving water, offering hospitality, visiting those in prison,

caring for the sick. In other words, the talents to be used to glorify God are compassion and kindness and mercy and justice.

Let's look at this third and last parable in Matthew 25 to see what it has to say to us as disciples of Jesus Christ in our day. I want to note again that in Matthew's gospel this is the last story that Jesus tells before he is arrested. It is as if Jesus wants to emphasize one more time, one more time, one last time the importance of compassion and justice in the lives of his disciples. He starts off with the image of the "Son of Man" coming back in his glory to judge the peoples. We need to notice several things about this image. The idea of the Son of Man comes from the Hebrew Scriptures in Daniel 7 as an image of the end of time, when all will be judged before God. The word translated as "man" here in Matthew actually is "anthropos" in Greek. It is the origin of our word "anthropology," so it really means "human being." Its translation, then, should be "human," so it should really be "Son of Humanity." And, in order to move it out of the sexist realm as much as possible, I'm going to change "Son" to "Beloved." Now, we'll see all the people gather before the "Beloved of Humanity" in a last judgment.

The impetus behind the idea of the "last judgment" is that we don't see a lot of justice in this life here on earth, so in order for there to be integrity in God and in the universe, the church has believed that there must be some sort of reckoning for both individuals and communities. It is the apocalyptic hope that justice finally, finally, finally will prevail. In this story that Jesus tells, the Beloved of Humanity will gather the nations, gather the communities of peoples for the great reckoning of justice and love.

He gathers the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Since our daughter Susan is a director and theater person, this stage direction raises a crucial question: Is this "stage right" or "house right?" It obviously makes a huge difference in this story. It seems like "stage right" to me, but it is not clear, so I'll leave that up to you in the congregation to decide where you belong in this story.

In this story, Jesus emphasizes the talents for which he is looking in his disciples. When the Beloved of Humanity returns in glory, he won't be looking for magnificent church buildings or fantastic family life centers. He'll be looking at how we treat those in need, how we treat those who are vulnerable – the sick, the homeless, the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the stranger. The treasures that this Beloved seeks are not mighty choruses or 10,000 member churches. Rather he is looking for those who serve, and he is especially looking for those who serve with no thought of reward.

Because as the noted American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us in his fine commentary on these verses, there is a great surprise for everybody in this parable. Those on the left who are sent to punishment are stunned when they hear that they are being punished because they did not serve the Beloved. They ask: "Lord, when did we see You hungry and did not feed You? When did we see You

naked and not clothe You? Lord, please, if we had only known that it was You, we would have certainly served You!" And the Beloved replies: "When you did not serve those in need, you were refusing to serve me."

But, those whom the Beloved calls "righteous," those on his right – they too are surprised. They say just about the same thing that the others say: "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You? We don't remember serving You." The Beloved replies, "When you served those in need, you served me." Niebuhr calls it the "surprise of the righteous." The people who serve those in need are not doing it to rack up points with God. They are rather acting out of compassion, out of connection to the other, out of love. The Beloved in this parable is not looking for mighty warriors or huge bankrolls but rather those who visit in prison, or provide shelter, or give food to the hungry.

There is one other thing that we should note here. This parable has the only hint at specific guidelines from Jesus about who is in and who is out. Both the righteous and the unrighteous know who the Beloved is – they both say "Lord, Lord." But it is those with compassionate hearts, who act for love and for justice, who are the ones who are rewarded. Now, I know as Presbyterians, we are not supposed to worry about who's in and who's out – let the Baptists worry about that – for us Presbyterians, it's up to God. But, just in case you are wondering, just in case you think about it, these are the best guidelines that we get from Jesus about getting close to the Beloved.

This parable seems to point to eternity, but it actually focuses on life here on earth here and now. It reminds disciples of Jesus in every age and in every place, including Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church: this is who we are. We not only believe in life after death, but we also believe in life before death. The point of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is not just what happens to us when we die, but rather what happens to us when we live, when we discover and re-discover the presence of God in our lives. This parable emphasizes that at the heart of our lives, at the heart of who we are as disciples of Jesus the Beloved One, is the power of compassion. This is who we are: God's compassion for us and for others. This is who we are: compassion in our hearts and in our actions, both as individuals and as communities.

The Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible reminds us about the meaning of the word "compassion." It comes from a Hebrew word connected to the word for "womb." She emphasizes that God's love for us is "womb love," like the connection that a mother has for a child whom she loves. Trible translates a verse in Jeremiah to demonstrate this meaning:

"Thus says Yahweh: Is Israel my dear son? My darling child?
For the more I speak of him, the more I do remember him.
Therefore my womb trembles for him,
I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him." (Jer. 31:20)

This parable in Matthew 25 is futuristic, but like all good futuristic stories, it asks us to look into the future in order to see the present more clearly, to see our lives and ourselves more clearly. God wants compassionate acts from us, acts as individuals and as communities. God also wants compassionate hearts, hearts that are faithful and trusting in God, hearts that enable us to love ourselves and to live for God and others in love. We are asked to work on the practices of our lives so that we can develop compassionate hearts, so that our wombs tremble for one another, because this is who we are, this is how we should live.

We're about to enter the Advent season when we'll hear all about wombs and compassion and caring and risking and courage in hard times, with great dangers, with many frustrations and difficult decisions to make – just about where we are now. In this last story that Jesus gives before his arrest and execution, he reminds his disciples of who we are and how we should live. He reminds us what those talents are that we should be sharing and not burying and hiding.

If you're wondering about all of this, here's a story about how to live it out. I give thanks that Ed Loring and Murphy Davis are with us in worship today. I've known Ed for almost 50 years. Ed and Murphy were the co-founders of the church shelter movement in the Atlanta area in 1979 at Clifton Presbyterian Church. It is a shelter that has provided hospitality for homeless men every night of the year since 1979 – that's every night, 365 nights a year since 1979. Indeed tonight, it will provide shelter for men in Atlanta. One of the elders of Clifton Church who helped to found the shelter was Ed Knight. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Ed Knight and I were privileged to be among those who wrote weekly meditations for the Clifton congregation. Every night Clifton sent a van to downtown Atlanta to pick up men and bring to the shelter. They had only 30 places at Clifton's shelter – they had taken out the pews and would set up mats in the small sanctuary. On cold nights there was a lot of pushing and shoving by the men to get on the van. Ed Knight was one of the drivers of the van, and I want to share a short meditation that he wrote on this parable in Matthew 25:

“As I sit here thinking about making the van trip tonight, thoughts pass through my mind of men pushing and shoving, striving to get one of the 30 places available for the night. I wonder why I do it. It really hurts to have three people grab your hand in the effort to get a ticket. As much as I abhor all the pushing and shoving that these people engage in because they all need a place to stay, I wonder if it's worth it. But then I remember the scriptures, and I know that if I am going to find Christ, it's going to be among the same people that he mingled with 2000 years ago: the poor, the homeless, the rejects of society. Then I remember the third van trip last week. As we were about to pull out for the last trip to the church, a man on the van pleaded: “Please, let that man on, he doesn't know the city, he won't be able to find a place to stay.” Then he said: “Let him take my place,” jumped from the van and said: “Here, take my place.” He helped the man onto the van and then turned and walked into the night. Then I know you are here, Lord, present with us.”

This is who we are – this is how we should live as disciples of Jesus. The goal is not just to say that Jesus is Lord but also to live “Jesus is Lord.” This is who we are. This is how we should live: God’s compassion for us, our compassion for ourselves and for others. This is who we are. Amen.