

“When Did We See You?”

Matthew 25:31-46

November 22, 2020

“And he told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.”

These words, from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, seem to summarize the teaching ministry of Jesus. Time and again in the Gospels Jesus gathers his disciples or turns to the crowd following him on the road and addresses them, not in propositional assertions or creedal statements, but through the telling of stories. A sower went out to sow. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a banquet. There was a man who had two sons.

Parables startle us with unexpected revelations. They reframe our perspectives, challenge our assumptions, and shift our priorities. As Will Willimon has written, “To be a Christian is...to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to look at the world with different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world.”

The parable we just heard from Matthew’s Gospel is the last one. I mean that in two ways. It comes at the end of Jesus’ life, the final lesson before the Holy Week journey that leads to his crucifixion. And here, as he closes out his earthly ministry, Jesus speaks of the end. He chooses this as his final lesson. Scripture is clear that history and human life are not haphazard or arbitrary. By God’s providence and design, there is purpose. There is direction. There was a beginning. There will be an end.

And so Jesus speaks with dramatic effect, using the instrument of the parable to describe God’s plan for the culmination of creation. It is a scene of judgment. Now, let me linger here to consider the term for just

a moment. We contemporary readers of scripture move very swiftly from a noun (judgment) to an adjective (judgmental) but the justification for this move is not found in the text itself. In Jesus’ parable, judgment is not a parting insult, an act of vindictive anger or retribution. It is instead the shedding of light on a truth that has been with us all along. Judgment is revelation, disclosing the trajectory of our lives in a way that we cannot avoid, obfuscate, or deflect. In this final parable, all our disguises and distractions are discarded and we are left with the unedited clarity of how our lives are spent. On this, we are judged by the one on the throne. Judgment is the honest assessment of candid reality.

In this ultimate parable, we are all gathered before the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. The light of truth is shined on the words we’ve chosen, the actions we’ve taken, and those we’ve avoided. That beaming truth is this. All of us will be given ample opportunity to lead lives of mercy and compassion toward those in need. The choice will be placed before each of us in our time. How we respond is the great test of our faithfulness.

Each time I read this parable of final judgment I am struck not by the separation but by what the sheep and goats have in common. Yes, both groups have encountered those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison. But both sheep and goats also raise the same bewildered query—*when did we see you?* Both groups were unaware that the judge and king appeared to them in the guise of human need. The sheep and the goats were equally ignorant of the divine presence in human form.

And so, I would suggest, this final exam in the school of human life is *not* a test of our religiosity,

our piety, our ability to discern the presence of God in the messiness of human encounter. Neither group knew! Instead, the singular, simple, sincere question is this: how did you respond to human need? That's all and that's everything. When the light of judgment shines on the pathway our life has taken, this is what will be disclosed. When another human being stood before you in need, what was your response? When you encountered the reality of cruelty, the existence of injustice, did you act? When presented with the opportunity to extend the compassion that God freely offered you, were you generous or were you tightfisted? The accumulation of these decisions come to define our lives.

It is impossible for me to reflect on this parable and not think of Lena Cooper. Ms. Lena must be well into her nineties by now. She's been a member of Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina for many decades. Long enough to be the unofficial grandmother of members now in their fifties who have been hugging her neck since they were preschoolers. In addition to being somewhat opinionated and strong-willed, Ms. Lena has been one of my most important teachers in the art of Christian living. Ms. Lena, whose own children lived only into their twenties and had to be cared for as if they were infants for all of those years. Ms. Lena, who showed up every Tuesday morning, rain or shine, to sharpen the pencils in the sanctuary pew racks. Ms. Lena, who knew the name of every child in the congregation, even those who only dropped in occasionally. Ms. Lena, who delivered Meals-on-Wheels, sorted food and clothing at the Urban Ministry Center, and packed summer lunches for children in housing projects. Ms. Lena, who never missed a church workday, a bake sale, a car wash, Vacation Bible School, or a fellowship dinner. Ms. Lena, whose legendary pound cake graced the table of every memorial service reception and whose car transported sick children, rowdy teenagers, homeless visitors, and a pastor whose own car lacked air-conditioning. One year, when I was the youth representative on the Elder Nominating

Committee, Ms. Lena's name surfaced as one who would be perfect for the role. Despite the warning from longtime members that she would never accept such a position, I was appointed to ask her to consider serving as an elder. I will never forget her response. After politely thanking me for asking, she said, "Chris, God didn't give me the gifts for that. I'm doing what I can to serve God and this church with the gifts I do have. So I have to say no to being an elder. I can only do the small things that are right in front of me. I'll leave the important work to others." Small things. Feeding the hungry. Caring for the sick. Speaking a kind word to friends and strangers alike. Making children feel welcomed and loved. Spreading compassion and warmth like light in every direction. Small things like living the faith we profess.

When did we see you, Lord? You see, the point is that God never comes to us dressed up like God. Instead, God shows up in the messiness of the ordinary, the brokenness of the world as it is, the dire needs that we've come to accept as normal. God comes in the unexpected and even the unwanted. God speaks to us in parables.

Next week, we'll begin the season of Advent, a journey of preparation that culminates in welcoming the one for whom we've been hoping. Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Lord. This week, we receive a warning *from* Jesus not to look too far. The one for whom we're waiting might already be present among us—present as a perennial question that, as one powerful preacher suggests, cuts to the beating heart of our faith.¹ How will you respond?

I was alone. I had no one in the world. My husband had died. My children lived in another state and I stayed in that apartment all those years. Did you call? Did you come?

I was in the state penitentiary, cut off from society for what I did. Convicted yes, but still a human being. Did you visit?

I was hungry, peering into a world of feasts and diets. I saw more food flushed down disposals than

my family had to eat. Did you offer me anything from your abundance?

I was without clothing, gazing into the shop windows, imaging the wardrobes of people like you. I waited for styles to change or other peoples' children to outgrow last year's coat. Did you offer me anything to wear?

I was a stranger, new at the job, new in this country, new in the city, new on the street, new in the building. I didn't know a soul. I didn't look like you. Did you introduce yourself to me?

I was right in front of you, vulnerable and at-risk. I was only a few miles away, a world away from your well-furnished homes and safe streets, not just a name in the paper or someone else's problem. I was your sibling, your responsibility, your opportunity to live what you believe. I was the presence of God in human form. *When did we see you, Lord?*

As a response to this parable of judgment at the end of Matthew's Gospel, leaders of the church centuries ago sought to list sins that we ought to avoid. Seven of those were deemed deadly—sinister enough to destroy a person entirely. On the list they included *akedia*, unfortunately translated *sloth* which calls to mind sluggishness or the way I like to spend a Saturday morning. The more accurate translation is the literal meaning of the Greek word. *I don't care*. This sin lies at the root of so much of what is broken in this world.

The test of a human life is this: when you encountered the need of another, how did you respond? The test of a church is this: when Christ comes to us in human form, do we seize the opportunity to act faithfully? Do we care?

When did we see him? You know. You know.
Amen.

ⁱ This insight comes from Fred Craddock, who reframed my vision of this parable. I'm paraphrasing here from the closing paragraphs of Fred Craddock's sermon "When He Shall Come." Fred B. Craddock: The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 96-97.