

Stewards of Lived Faith

Matthew 25:31-46

The passage of the separation of the sheep and goats is well known. It is the conclusion to three parables that Jesus has told about the coming of the kingdom. In each of those parables, the emphasis is on waiting, and on being ready and faithful as we wait. Now Jesus gives his last formal teaching in Matthew’s gospel. The waiting is over. The King has returned. The lamb that was slain is now the lamb upon the throne. The Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head now has a kingdom. The shepherd is now the Shepherd-King. To all those to whom Jesus asked the question, “Who do you say that I am?” this is the unveiled answer. Once judged by the nations, Jesus now stands as judge of them.

Over the years the church has had difficulty interpreting this passage. It relates to two key verses: Verse 32: “All the nations will be gathered before him...” And verse 40: “Truly I tell you just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

In verse 32, the question is ‘who is meant ‘all the nations’? When the translators say, “all the nations are gathered,” the word there is *ethne*. The trouble with that word is that it is almost always used in Matthew to refer to gentiles. If that is the case, then the people appearing before the King are the gentile nations, which excludes Israel and the church. This is not a universal judgment of everyone. This is specific to the nations to whom the gospel has been preached.

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In verse 40 the question is ‘who is meant by ‘these little ones?’ The word is *adelphoi*, which is translated as ‘these little ones.’ But in Matthew the word *adelphoi* is almost always interpreted in relationship to disciples of Jesus. So in chapter 10 we read these words of Jesus as he commissions his disciples:

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward (Matt. 10:40-42).”

If you understand this passage as referring to the Gentile nations and the little ones referring to the disciples of Jesus, the interpretation goes like this: Jesus has commissioned the disciples to go to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel. In some places they have been welcomed, but in others they have been badly mistreated, even put in prison. But there have been some who have helped out the followers of Jesus, and unknown to them, in doing so, they were in fact, offering aid to Christ himself, for these disciples were his emissaries and to receive them was to receive Christ.

On the other hand, if the passage is not using the word *ethne* to speak only of the Gentiles, but of everyone, the church and Israel included. Everyone is being called to account. And the word *adelphoi* is not being used to speak of followers of Jesus or the early disciples then Jesus says, ‘whoever ministers to the least of these’, he means the poor, the downtrodden of society; anyone in need of water, food, hospitality, support or care. To help the poor is to minister to Christ himself.

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But what if we weren't forced to make a choice and both are true?

In the first interpretation we are reminded of a great truth that sometimes we forget. Contrary to popular opinion, the church is not simply a voluntary organization of like-minded people. It is not just a body of loosely connected individuals, but the body of Christ. You may be an eye, I may be a foot, but together we are part of his body. And Christ identifies himself with and promises himself to those who are now his body in this world.

There may have been a time when the church thought too much of itself and it became pompous and proud. But there may be an equal danger when the church thinks too little of itself. Remember the first persecution in the church. Paul, before he became a Christian, was rounding up Christians and putting them in prison. Then on the road to Damascus he is encountered by Jesus in a blinding vision. What is amazing in that passage is what Jesus says. He does not say, “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting these people?” He says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?”

You can't get a closer sense of attachment, of being one with Christ than that. We are one in Christ. We are one with Christ. Christ takes seriously the struggles we encounter in seeking to live out our faith. Christ cares for us in a deep and abiding and lasting way. We have been sent by him and if we have been sent by him we are his.

In this first interpretation, we are encouraged because we are reminded who we are and that we are loved by one who will simply not let us go.

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But what if the second interpretation is also valid? That Christ does identify, not only with us, but with all those with the greatest need?

I think we learn that our choices matter. And it's not the big choices that matter most, but the little ones. Whoever gives *one* cup of water. We tend to think that greatness comes from having great opportunity. But in the kingdom of God, greatness comes in using the multitude of small opportunities.

Someone sent me an email a few weeks ago. It included a story of a student who wrote:

During my second month of college, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: ‘What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?’ Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50's, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank.

Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. ‘Absolutely’, said the professor. ‘In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say ‘hello’.

I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy. Even a gift as small as knowing someone's name counts.

You never know what a small act will do.

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One night at 11:30 p.m. an older African American woman was standing on the side of an Alabama highway trying to endure a lashing rainstorm. Her car had broken down and she desperately needed a ride. Soaking wet, she decided to flag down the next car. A young white man stopped to help her, generally unheard of in those conflict-filled 1960's. The man took her to safety, helped her get assistance and put her into a taxicab. She seemed to be in big hurry, but wrote down his address and thanked him. Seven days went by and a knock came on the man's door. To his surprise, a giant console color T.V. was delivered to his home. A special note was attached. It read: “Thank you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes, but also my spirits. Then you came along. Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying husband's bedside just before he passed away. God bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others.” Sincerely, Mrs. Nat King Cole.

“I was hungry; you gave me food. I was thirsty; you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.” Jesus said, “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.

This too is a word of encouragement.

I have been connected with congregations that had as few as six people for worship and some who have had over 300 at worship. I have never yet met a congregation that did not have a glass of cold water to offer someone.

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There's a small town in Manitoba called Winnipegosis. Population 700. Churches 7. Average attendance at the Presbyterian church 12-14. One of the most vital congregations I have ever known. Every year as interim moderator I would get a three year plan from the clerk of session. Don't tell anyone but the session actually met numerous times without me. They made their own plans.

One day the clerk session phoned me and said, “Dale there's a lady in our town who is dying. She doesn't come to our church. We are pretty sure she doesn't go to any other church either. We want to know if it's okay if a few us from our church went to see her and offered to pray with her.” I said, “You don't need permission from me. Go!” She phoned back a few days later to say the lady had passed away but before she did she thanked us for coming and praying with her.”

Fred Craddock says that often we think of the Christian life as a thousand dollar bill that you spend all at once: some big act of sacrifice; some great choice of martyrdom. “This is where Dale gave his life for Jesus!”

But in reality the Christian life means cashing in your thousand dollar bill for quarters and offering one small act of service here, one small act of service there. It takes a lifetime to use all the quarters.

Whether this passage is speaking of the church family or whether the broader human family, the truth is that Christ cares for both. Every day we walk out into a world that faces huge challenges. It can be overwhelming. You wonder, ‘What difference can I make?’

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And then you remember this passage of scripture—one cup of water.

It is God’s invitation for us to look around in our congregations and to see the small gifts – the cups of water – God has blessed us with. And then to look out into the world for those places and those people who are parched and thirsty for living water.

Because by the grace of God we have been invited to be stewards of a living faith. Amen.