

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
November 26, 2023
Matthew 25: 31-46

What would you want to be judged on? By what criteria do you want people to look at and evaluate your life? Now you may say, you don't want to be judged, period. Baloney! If there is no basis of judgment, then no complement can be offered, no rewards or recognition can be extended, and no lovely comments at your funeral. In reality, don't we want to be recognized or affirmed? If so, what is it you want to be recognized or affirmed for? Perhaps for the ways you cared for others? By being a faithful spouse or a good parent? By being faithful in your walk with Christ?

What would you want to be judged on? What is most important to you? What have you valued in your life that you hope others would recognize and lift up about you? If you stood before the King claiming to have been faithful, what would be on your resume?

Bill Sanders preached last week on the parable of the talents, which comes just prior to our passage. In that parable, a master/landowner figure gives resources to his servants and then comes back to assess. He judges whether he thinks they were faithful and responsible or not. Our parable this morning shares that same trope. Like the master in the parable of the talents who judges, the Son of Man, or the King, in our parable sits in judgment. In both parables, no seminars are provided to lay out the master's or the King's expectations. No pamphlet of best practices is handed out or an easy-to-use website with an FAQ section. The expectation seems to be that the subjects know the character and propensities of the master. Because if they know the character and the propensities of the master, they will know what to do. it.

These parables in chapter 25 come towards the end of the Matthew's gospel, moving from Jesus' teachings and encounters to the cross. By the end of ch. 26, Jesus is standing before Pilate. Consequently, there is a theme that runs through the parable of the bridesmaids in vv. 1-13, the parable of the talents in vv. 14-30, and this one. It is how to act while the master is away; how we act in time in-between. Jesus will be going away, too, through his death and resurrection and ascension. That doesn't mean an end to what he began. It continues, and that continuance depends on how his followers act after he has gone away. Will they be ready, faithful, and about God's kingdom?

The parable is framed as “when the Son of Man comes in his glory.” The Son of Man is a title for the messiah. After the messiah has gone away and comes back, he will bring everything to its completed plan. This is what we wait for in the season of Advent. We remember his first coming so as to anticipate his return.

Now another word about parables. A moment ago, I asked you, “if you stood before the King wanting to be deemed faithful, what would be on your resume?” You might answer, only for the grace of Christ, only through the cross and Christ’s forgiveness. And if you did, that would be a terrific answer. It is true, our justification is only through Christ’s sacrifice and redemption. Christ receives us not because of our good deeds, but by his forgiveness. However, that is not the answer we are looking for here.

These are parables. And parables, like a poem, is structured so as to hone in on a certain perspective. It is not trying to cover all matters, it is honing in to help us gain perspective on one particular issue.

Furthermore, they are structured in ways that may be a bit off-putting, featuring hierarchical societal structures, judgment language, and harsh punishment. As I have read this passage with people in the past, I have found that the judgement language often derails the conversation, striking guilt or fear or a view of God that is not all that warm and inviting. Therefore, I encourage you to think of the judgement setting as a story or parable structure that helps hone in on the desired perspective. It is not ultimately wanting us to think of God as a monstrous judge.

If we can get past these off-putting aspects, perhaps we discern how the parable is designed to invite us into a particular perspective. What pleases the master, what is reflective of the kingdom, what is it that God looks down and hopes to see. And that question might take our minds to a lot of places. Giving to charities, being honest, being a good parent, and on and on. But in this parable, it is one type of experience that is the mark – kindness in the face of need or desperation. Jesus identifies with that moment of despair and fear and helplessness and hunger.

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for 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, naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

Have you ever come without a job, looked over the bills, and did not know how to get by? Have you been so overwhelmed at a point in your life that you did not see

yourself getting through the situation? Do you have a memory of an act of kindness or help extended when you desperately needed it. It is that moment, that experience, that Jesus identifies with. That is the mark, *where vulnerability meets kindness*.

Now interestingly, those who get judged affirmatively and welcomed into God's kingdom are befuddled, and largely because of the phrasing. They respond: 'Lord, when was it that we saw *you* hungry and gave *you* food, or thirsty and gave *you* something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw *you* a stranger and welcomed *you*, or naked and gave *you* clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw *you* sick or in prison and visited *you*?' And 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*.' Like thanking someone for being there for you kid, the King feels cared for in those encounters.

What I hear in their response is that they never expected to find or encounter the Christ in such places, in such faces. I also hear that the way they treated people in these places and moments was the ultimate benchmark for the King, as if they had done it to the King himself. Jesus identifies with the most vulnerable.

This should be no surprise if you have read your Old Testament. To fear the Lord in the Old Testament is to care for the most vulnerable in society. Micah says the Lord wants you to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? The prophets pretty consistently beat this drum, calling people back to the ethic of community and caring for the poor, the prisoner, the down-trodden, those in society who have been cut off from their networks of care, such as the orphan, the widow, and the sojourner. Even the letter of James in the New Testament says that "religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

In the Presbyterian church, there is a lot of language and emphasis on Matthew 25. It is a bit of a movement or a program, you might say. And in many ways, I think this emphasis is a good corrective. Given all the centuries the church has focused on right belief or right doctrine, this emphasis shifts the focus to right practice, to how we live out faith in society, and how we seek to connect and care with people in these most vulnerable moments – that should be a mark of the church.

But, there is a risk when we turn something into a program, or there is always a risk in our charity and service, that it becomes all about us, checking off our boxes, making us feel good about ourselves. But the parable presents the moment of care

as not just a good action, but a moment of encounter, or connecting with Christ in a powerful way.

Our poem this morning plays with notion of encounter, a play between the impersonal and the personal. Of all the public places, dear.” The poem is voiced by a homeless person, who calls the listener dear, a personal address. “Of all the public places, dear / to make a scene, I’ve chosen here.” It blends the personal appeal with the impersonal assessment that this person is making a scene.

The poem expresses the common nature of our encounters with the needy. Rather than a personal encounter, it is an impersonal one, trying to help but also to be rid of the scene. The third stanza uses the language of a street performer or a circus act, performing so as to get what they need. The exchange is transactional. It is repeated, never significantly altered despite the best intentions. “For coppers I can dance or sing. / For silver-swallow swords, eat fire. / For gold-escape from locks and chains.”

In the next short stanza comes a nice ambiguity, what is the “change?” Is it the loose coppers or silvers, or is it change in the circumstances and society that leaves him making a scene on your stoop? “It’s not as if I’m holding out / for frankincense or myrrh, just change.” It’s an interesting reference, especially in light of our parable. For it was the baby Jesus who was received with frankincense or myrrh, evoking that sense of encounter and divine visitation.

In a season when we do quite a bit to help the needy, whether through clothing donations, or thanksgiving meals, or grocery items, or Christmas gifts, this notion of encounter gives us something to consider. Do we expect to encounter Christ through such actions? Are we open to such possibility?

To circle back to the parable, there is another level of interplay. The parable is initially framed as the judgment of the nations. It is the corporate character that is being judged. And yet, it then turns to the micro, to the actions of individuals. What is the character of the nation, I suppose, if not the choices of its constituents? These are connected.

This emphasis in the church on Matthew 25 invites us to think of the character of God’s kingdom as being judged by how we care for the vulnerable. But it is more than just good actions done impersonally. It is about connection, it is about seeing Christ in that encounter, and furthermore a desire for real change, not just throwing a few coppers in exchange for an act.

Vulnerability. It is hard to grasp the beauty of grace and the hope Christ brings without vulnerability. In fact, I think our greatest expressions of thankfulness and gratitude come from those experiences of receiving help and kindness at a moment of need, of pain, of vulnerability. Our greatest experiences of forgiveness are when we offer or receive forgiveness when no other resolution is possible.

And so, while the parable frames itself as a judgment, and if you have acted accordingly, you get to inherit the kingdom, there is an aspect of irony. The irony is that if you view the care for each other in our need as a holy encounter, and these encounters affect us and lead to mutual care and actual change, perhaps we shape and create an experience of the kingdom as much as we inherit it. We come to express the Christ who meets us in our moments of need, who offers help and grace, forgiveness and kindness.

Perhaps in this season when we find ways to help and serve others, maybe we could look for how Christ is present, how the kingdom is discoverable in those encounters. Maybe it could put us back in touch with the experience of vulnerability and the song of gratitude and praise that comes out of it, and the willingness to receive grace, and in turn, to be a vessel of grace.

And all God's children said... Amen.

The Judgment of the Nations

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