



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

What Faith Does

by Pastor John Strommen on Matthew 25:31-46

Sunday, April 7, 2019

One reliable feature of Matthew's parables is that a familiar scene from life is presented: working in a vineyard, getting invited to a party you don't want to attend. In each parable, the familiar scene points to something transcendent and eternally significant.

And then we get this parable, which presents us with a decidedly different scene:

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

In contrast to the others, this parable begins in the future with an otherworldly setting, between this life and the next. It begins with the end. Then it *points to* the world we live in now, to the existence we share with our neighbors who are hungry, thirsty, lack clothing, are sick or in prison. And it makes an unmistakable connection between those needy folk in our present world and judgment day. To be sorted as a sheep is to be given life. To be sorted as a goat is to be sentenced.

There are a couple very big messages in this:

First, this parable clearly says that how we relate to these people in our lives has eternal significance. This is a meditation on the character of the kingdom of God - a counter proposal to the kingdom of this world, where the poor, the sick, the prisoners, *really, truly* get treated as the *least of these*. But in the kingdom of God, the least of these are not the least, are they? How we treat them becomes the measuring stick of whether we are sheep or goats!

Interestingly, in Matthew's gospel, this parable Jesus told is right before the passion narrative. Right before Jesus himself would become hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison.

So, this parable is given much deeper resonance when we consider that Jesus not only identifies with such folk, Jesus *became* such folk.

One wonders, who are these sort of people today in whom God is hiding? And how do we regard them?

This is an especially challenging passage for many God-fearing Americans because of some of our assumptions as American Christians. For instance, the Protestant Work ethic and the gospel of prosperity are both highly American ideas that assume economic prosperity for a person is tied to the quality of that person's commitment to Jesus. If one is a good Christian, one will be blessed economically. Wealth, then, is validation of one's good relationship with God. It stands to reason, by this way of thinking, that for those who have little, their standing before God is suspect.

So, you will hear things like, "Well, a lot of those people living in poverty, those in prison, they made choices. They're morally compromised. They lack initiative. They should accept Jesus into their hearts. They reap what they sow, right?"

Or, "Is the care of the sick really my business?" I don't have to tell you, this one is currently a hotly debated topic.

"And *strangers*? How can we ever trust strangers, let alone welcome them, especially if they're immigrants?" Again, ripped from the headlines.

The truth is, we often like to play the judge who separates the sheep and the goats in our world. And when we do, guess who we assign the part of the goat? The poor, the incarcerated, the strangers, "the least of these."

And along comes Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "the goats aren't who you think they are. Disown the least of these and you disown me. I've pitched my tent with them."

Now, the point isn't that any of the "least of these" are saints. They're not. Nor are any of us, by the way. The point is, we're all in it together and Jesus refuses to leave some people out in the cold.

I know that some who are listening may feel this is less relevant because our daily lives don't include many who are living in poverty or in prison or a stranger. But that is part of the point, isn't it? An insulated life is an unfaithful one. We are called to those on the margins, but if we are not collectively, as a people, addressing and engaging those at the margins, are we heeding Jesus' words today?

Big picture: according to Matthew, God is all about *compassion toward those who need it most* and God expects compassion from us as well, we who claim to follow Jesus. Again, this is *who God is, and that's good news!* He is the kind of God who cares about the down and outers, the ones the world wants to forget. This is a God with heart. This is a God you can believe in, a God you can trust. A God who holds us accountable.

So, a major function of a parable like this, is to help us not to focus on judgment day, but on where judgment day points us, namely, to the present, to those in need. They are not only the apple of God's eye, God is one of them.

What does that mean for Mt Carmel in 2019? How do we increase our commitment to and involvement with those God has chosen to identify with?

But second, let me turn to a question many of you are probably struggling with in this parable. It's great that God cares about the marginalized and expects us to do the same, but aren't we supposed to be saved by faith and not by works? If I'm going to avoid team goat and make it onto team sheep, I don't know if I've done enough to help these people. Mother Teresa did, I'm pretty sure, but I know I don't do enough. Is my salvation in doubt because I don't do enough?

Anyone have that question?

Let's talk about this. Notice the word "inherit." Jesus says to the sheep, "come forward, *inherit* the kingdom prepared for you..." Inheritance is a gift, my friends, not something we earned because we did the right things. It is a gift given to those with faith, those who understand it is a *gift*.

But what about the poor goats, didn't they have faith? Here is where the character of faith and works are disclosed brilliantly. Did you notice in this parable that when Jesus says to the sheep that they fed him when he was hungry, thirsty, etc., the sheep say, "when did we feed you?" "Well, when you fed the least of these, you fed me."

So, the sheep didn't know they were doing this for Jesus. Why did they do these kind things? Because their neighbor was in need. Because it came spontaneously from their hearts, not from their calculations about what they needed to do to be saved.

The goats also were surprised to learn that the needy ones they had failed to love were in fact, Christ. And of course, they certainly were thinking, "well, if we had known that, we would have acted differently." In other words, "if we knew this was what we were being tested on, we would have been more loving to these people."

But that's not love, is it? That's only loving yourself, using the other person as a means to an end - to get you through the pearly gates!

True faith frees us to love our neighbor because our neighbor needs love, not because we need points. You see, God freely gives you all you need, so faith is the gift of trusting that God loves you, sustains you, blesses you, and will give you a life that transcends death. To have such faith in a God that generous is to be grateful and to become generous yourself. That's what faith does. It frees us, and it sends us to love.

So, in this parable, the sheep are judged by their faith, not their works. It just so happens that feeding the hungry is the fruit of their faith. It's what people of faith do.

You see here that faith is so much more than assent to propositions – "sure, I agree there's a God who sent his son, Jesus." Faith is a relationship that engenders trust and generates gratitude, generosity and love. Faith is a relationship that not only frees

us to love our neighbor, it also frees us to find *God in our neighbor*, because that is where God is.

James said it well when he said, “faith without works is dead.” The truth is, faith without works isn’t even faith. It’s something else.” And if this is slightly unsettling, maybe it’s supposed to be.

I want to close on this note: when we speak of “faith practices,” we are doing nothing less than tending and nurturing a relationship that is far more than a ticket to heaven. That’s why it’s so important to talk about it, reflect on it, learn about it. Faith is who we are, a creature dependent on our creator. And faith sends us out to love. Amen.