

Sermon – When Was It?

Scripture Readings – Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

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Our first reading, Ephesians chapter 1 verses 15-23, is one of Paul's longest recorded prayers. We don't know much about the Ephesian church to which he was writing, but it is likely that it, like many early churches, was a diverse community. So Paul focuses on reconciliation in Christ and the establishment of a new world order in which Christ is head. The old powers and the old divisions have fallen away, and so Paul prays that his listeners—both then and now—might come to live lives of faith active in love, shaped and built upon this new reconciling power of Christ. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people:

*15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power. 20 God put this power to work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and seated him at God's right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22 And God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Amen.*

For all of November so far, the Revised Common Lectionary has been taking us almost in a continuous stream through several chapters in Matthew, skipping very little except chapter 24, whose parallel passage from Mark is taken up next week by the Rev. Dreitcer. For the last two Sundays, you have been hearing from a series of parables in a single, extended discourse given by Jesus to his disciples in private, discussing the coming of the kingdom of heaven, and finally culminating in the passage we are about to hear, which continues relating the words of Jesus as, now dropping the parable form, he describes his final coming in glory. Hear now these words from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31 - 46.

*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."*

The title of the sermon: When Was It?

*The text: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" Matthew 25:37*

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable and pleasing in your sight, O God; Amen.

Good morning, and greetings! I echo the sentiment we heard in the letter to the Ephesians this morning, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints," and I thank you for your gracious welcome in bringing me here today. Our plate is full this morning: a celebration of St. Andrew and the Scottish heritage of the Presbyterian Church, a congregational meeting, a meal following the service to further the youth mission work of the church, the culmination of the liturgical calendar in Christ the King Sunday, before we start over once more next week with the season of Advent, and here we have before us, to explore together, from the book of Matthew, a doozy of a passage about the coming of the Lord in judgment.

There is no question that judgment, whenever we see it as we see it here in this passage, direct and unavoidable, complete with both reward and condemnation, makes us uneasy. We worry about where we stand in it, and we worry about the very notion of such a thing at all. This is...disturbing, severe, and difficult, for sure.

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry?" goes the plea. One of the reasons this passage from Matthew's Gospel has such power is that the people within the story are not alone in their confusion. We the hearers of this alarming narrative stand right alongside them in questions and uncertainty. What is the meaning of this, we wonder? Who are gathered here? Are we those people? We, with them, wish to know definitively when and how we have done, or not done, what is required of us.

We wish to know definitively, and understand clearly. But these words of Jesus make some powerful and uncomfortable demands, and so we are also not so sure we want to know and understand right *now*. Part of why this story is so unnerving is that we live in a tension between, on one hand, its clear urgency and heavy consequences, which demand that we give it our full attention, and on the other hand, the fact that it may require something of us, which makes us want to back away and pretend it isn't there.

Being here in a city which serves as the seat of government for the state, maybe we can learn from how politicians handle this kind of difficulty: can we just appoint a blue ribbon panel, perhaps, to look into this matter of the judgment of the nations and report back to us several years down the road?

We would certainly have no trouble, for this passage, finding ways to get derailed for vast periods of time in questions and arguments about translation, uncertainties and controversies

about interpretation. If you survey the literature, the sermons, the commentaries, and the articles about this passage, looking for answers, you can get mired down almost immediately, because scholars and preachers have taken this passage in a surprising variety of interpretive directions.

Who are these nations gathered before Jesus? Is it all the people of the world? The specific phrase used would allow that, but also hints that it might be Gentiles only, or even that it is specifically the non-Christians of the world. Is it only those living at the time of this event, or are the dead raised for this judgment as well? Even more controversially, who are the ones Jesus calls “the least of these who are members of my family”? Interpreters have argued that this simply means the needy persons of the world. Other interpreters have taken it to mean the people of Israel. Quite a few scholars have made a case that this phrase actually refers only to Christians. So are we dealing with a judgment of all of us for how we have treated our neighbors? Of Gentiles for how they have treated the Jews? Of non-Christians for how they have treated the followers of Christ?

If we don't know where to see ourselves in the story, this feels like a good excuse for not taking any action in response to it. Indeed, the deeper we go, the wider the circle of theologians we bring into the picture, the more confusing it gets. We could forever remain so happily stalled in muddled uncertainty that we utterly fail to take note of the surprising fact that regardless of *interpretation*, there might in fact be almost no difference in *implication*, at least for how we are to order our own lives. How can that be?

Let us explore the nature of the judge and king we find here. For the judgment described here is actually somewhat peculiar, and very different than we might expect. There are no measurements of purity, of respectability, or of sinless living, no morality grades given. There is exactly one factor mentioned: whether the people attended to the hardships of “the least of these.” There may be other passages discussing other elements of living rightly, but here, in this scene, the whole thing hinges upon seeing need, and meeting it. It is the virtue of charity which is lifted up here: sharing is apparently not just for children. Active, servant love is what is called for.

This judgment is presided over by one who comes from above, yet who judges on people's treatment of those below them. This judge hears the forsaken and remembers the forgotten. Were the hungry ever fed, the thirsty ever given a drink? Their condition is not, in the end, neglected, but is directly taken up, and people are called to account for it. Indeed, we can see this kind of concern shown by God all the way back to the beginning of the human story. “Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground,” God said to Cain after he murdered his brother Abel. Later, the cries of the Israelites, slaves in Egypt, rise up to God, and God answers them.

This is a judge who does not fail to notice when we neglect one another, and who does not forget it...which may sound harsh, until we consider that the alternative is far harsher. Would we want to live in a world where the God of the universe *does* forget the tears of the needy and the alone, and the blood of the victim, and never mentions them? Would we be glad to live in one where the cries of the hungry for food and the mistreated for justice, cries which often remain unheeded in this life, will go *eternally* unheeded? I don't think we would want that, after all.

Instead, our Lord, the same Christ who has *personally* joined in the human condition, in his Incarnation, and experienced our sufferings, now stands again with the needy in how they were treated by those around them.

And it is in recognizing this fact, this particular consistency of the God we follow, that we discover why getting bogged down in questions of how to interpret the details of this passage, at the expense of failing to see its implications, is a foolish mistake. The God of the ancient Israelites and their ancestors saw, and continually made a big deal of, the unmet needs of the orphaned and the widowed. The Incarnate Jesus taught us that following him demands loving our neighbor as ourselves, which in practical terms means refusing to leave unmet any need in our neighbor that we would leave unmet in ourselves. And finally the returning Jesus, presiding over this scene of judgment, has asserted his solidarity and identification with the imprisoned, the sick, the naked, the stranger, the thirsty, and the hungry.

What does this mean? It means that no matter who we are in this story or whether we are present in it at all, we must take heed of what is again declared to be of great significance to our God, in this passage as everywhere else. Are all of us being judged here for how we have treated all the world's needy? Then we must find the hungry, and give them food. Is it non-Christians being judged here for how they have received and treated those who follow Christ? If we would be those who follow Christ then, we must, again, find the hungry, and give them food. The requirement is the same, and we cannot ignore it.

Hearing a final judgment attached to this requirement, though, is still hard. One of the things which makes us uncomfortable about hearing this passage is that it provokes a certain amount of fear. Which one am I? Sheep? Or goat? But in fact we all have within us both goat and sheep, both the desire to live selfishly, and the capacity to live a life attentive to the needs of those around us. The question isn't, "Which am I, on that day when we all appear before the Lord?" but, "Which will I be, today?" Which of these aspects of ourselves will we allow to define us? Which of these character traits: blindness and self-interest, or awareness and generosity, are we encouraging daily in ourselves through steady practice, and which are we leaving by the wayside, uncultivated and unused?

We are always, of course, tempted to see to our own needs only. This is the most obvious reason we act as goats. But added to this is a sense we often may have of overwhelming need in the world: too many hungry to feed, too many sick to care for, in comparison to the little in our hands to share. Where would we even start? Does an extra donation, one more visit or phone call, even make a difference at all, or will our giving simply vanish into the world's poverty without making a dent?

You may recall the episode from John, chapter 6, which brings this sense of pointlessness or inadequacy front and center, when the disciple Andrew contemplates aloud what is before them: five thousand hungry people, and but one person he has discovered who is willing to be generous: "There is a boy here," he says, "who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

St. Andrew's uncertainty and our hesitation are directly and incontrovertibly answered when all five thousand are fed.

And so we come back to the question: which—sheep, or goat—will I be, today? How do we ourselves receive the sick and the stranger, the prisoner, the hungry, and the thirsty? We need not go very far to find out, for surely there are strangers in our own church. Almost certainly there are hungry in our own neighborhood. What shall we do about this?

This is not a rhetorical question, for I am enthusiastic at the prospect of serving this community alongside you and working to enable the ministry to which every one of you is personally called.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry?”

When was it? It is now. It is now that we are feeding, or not feeding, visiting, or not visiting. It is today that we are caring for, or not caring for, the least among us. Shall we delay in order to do more interpretive work? Shall we hesitate and hold back, claiming that our giving is of no consequence? We cannot even really claim as an excuse our own fear of not having enough, since we just discussed our God being one who, in the end, remembers every unmet need.

And so we pray that this same God will open our eyes to the needs around us and our hearts to those inhabiting those places of need, and will make firm our resolve to step forward into those places, bringing the hungry something to eat, the thirsty something to drink, the naked something to wear, welcoming the stranger, visiting the imprisoned, and tending to the sick, wherever we meet them, and in them, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.