

Fed with Justice

Matthew 25: 31-46

This is the last Sunday before Thanksgiving and before Advent. So, today is a good opportunity to recommit ourselves to Christian fundamentalism. By that, I mean the Christian's fundamental responsibility and privilege of feeding the hungry, ministering to the sick, and all those other things "Christ requires" in the parable from Matthew 25: 31-46. They are the criteria set forth at the Last Judgment in today's gospel lesson for the sheep and for the goats.

This is the last of three long parables comprising the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew. All three are set against the backdrop (theatre talk) of the end of time and the last judgment. But these stories do not represent a theology of eschatology. Their purpose is not to teach us what will happen at the end of world. Using the general understanding and accepted belief of the first century listeners, its purpose is to reveal what God, as understood by the Christian Church, expects from all those who are followers of the Way of Christ.

Sheep and goats are convenient images, representing good and evil. Sheep are symbolic of the people of God with Christ as "the good shepherd". The sacrificial lamb of Passover is an image applied to Jesus' death. Goats, on the other hand, often seem to represent the satanic. The symbolic "scapegoat" becomes the recipient of the people's sin each year and is, therefore, banished to the wilderness. The black goats and white sheep from that part of the world provide a visual image that is both graphic and unfortunate considering our national heritage. That reflects more of our culture baggage than anything intrinsic to this story.

The parable represents the early Church's understanding of Jesus' teaching concerning the nature of discipleship. It is set in bold relief against the background of final judgment. The scenario is eternal life or eternal death.

Good stories inspire questions. These are some questions that arise for me:

- What's at stake in parable?

Everything is at stake for the early church. This is represented by gaining entrance into the kingdom of Christ or failing to gain entrance. This is the very meaning of their faith and all to which their lives were committed.

- How do you get in?

Everything about our faith is wrapped up in our ethical treatment of the poor, the hungry, and the outcast. Those who enter the "kingdom" of Christ, the Son of Man, are those who identify them with the Christ.

- Who are these people?

The poor, the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned are called the "least of these". Since all nations are gathered in this story, they must be all of us. They cannot be some other group, but all the people of this world. Their identity must run across all lines of race, nationality, religion, wealth, religion, and power.

- Why is the judgment a surprise to everyone?

This is a surprise because of Christ the king's total identification with the least, the lowest, and the neediest among us. Remember, he said either "you did it to me" or "you failed to do it for me".

- What's the point of the parable?

The meaning of this parable is all wrapped up in the biblical concept of justice. The Old Testament prophet Micah wrote, "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice?" Somehow, the sheep acted with justice while the goats did not. And both groups were surprised.

The root question from this parable is "What is biblical justice?" What does it mean to treat the hungry, the poor, and the imprisoned with justice? To the first-century Church, justice meant inclusiveness and a recognition that the world Christ was bringing into sight is radically different than the Roman world. The Christ world is radically inclusive and compassionate. It's visible reality is peace, not through power and conquest, but peace through compassion. This is peace as *shalom*, the world moving toward wholeness

What does it mean for us to treat each other with justice? For us, justice means food to meet hunger and also to help the hungry with the means to get their own food. It means water to meet thirst and also to help the thirsty find access to water. It is a room to meet homelessness and also to help society ensure adequate housing as well as the means to afford it, support to take care of it, and stable communities to surround it.

Justice means clothing to meet the lack of covering and it also means to help the poor with the means to buy their own clothing. It means comfort in times of illness and also to help all people have access to medical resources and the means to healthy lifestyles. It means presence in times of imprisonment and also to ensure more justice in the justice system.

Faith requires social justice and ethical treatment of the poor and needy. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann defines justice as "finding out what belongs to someone and giving it back to them". This parable calls us to seek an even broader definition of justice.

We say "yes" to social justice and "yes" to ministry to those in need. Even more than this, however, biblical justice is a call to *shalom*, a call to all people to help people toward becoming whole. All people includes each one of us.

Justice happens at every level. It happens physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It happens at the institutional level, the national level, and the global level.

What is the message for us in this parable? It is to make justice part of everything we do, integral to everything we do. It is to make justice integral to everything we are. The challenging question for us at Thanksgiving is this, "If justice is the diet we feed others and the diet we eat ourselves, what does the menu look like? Can we survive on such a diet?"

How does this parable speak to our situation and to our congregational life? How is justice integral to everything we do as church? How can we be very intentional about practicing justice in our life together?

Our governance structure is geared to justice. The goal is participation by all. Mechanisms are in place for hearing the voice of one who may be key to discerning the Spirit. We work to be able to hear the concerns of the few while not being held hostage by a few.

We are preparing to buy a building, the first church home for Crossroads Church. What does justice mean in terms of the question of the building and its location? Speaking as a short time Northlander, I am aware of the tension between north of river and south of the river people in Kansas City, a tension reflected in Crossroads. Speaking as pastor of this church, I am aware of the presence of this tension in our congregation focused now around the new building. I am aware of a need for the church to make healthy decisions. I am also aware of the need to move forward as church. How can our commitment to justice inform this time in our lives? I have a few suggestions.

Our congregation needs to have a greater awareness of our blessed we are by those who travel a long way to be here. Some travel a really long way: from Lawrence, Cameron, and Polo, for example. Others travel just a long way, though they do it quite often. These come from Liberty, Smithville, Parkville, and Shawnee. We need to aware that many of these people are facing even more drive time with this move.

Our congregations needs to recognize that, at present, we have one church-wide event each year in the Northland: the Sermon on the Mound at the Field of Dreams. Perhaps we will consider the possibility of more church-wide events north of the river? Perhaps this is a way to allow justice to move through this experience.

I am aware that there are changes in people's lives prompted by the changes in location. This is true for all our members and friends. Let us pray for those whose journey may end up taking them somewhere else in the future. Things will not stay the same. Ultimately, this is a good thing fundamentally, but it won't be easy.

Justice will be served in the movement of this congregation toward health and wholeness. Justice will be served by our sensitive awareness each individual person and each household of persons are on that same journey. We have prayed, asking God to show us a place. Our prayers are being answered and, perhaps the answers lies at 7917 Main Street. As so often happens when fervent prayer is answered, we will find ourselves shaken to our roots. As a result, we will be able to pull them free of the ground in which we're stuck and move on down the road of our destiny.

How do we move, as a congregation, down that road to find our vision and direction? First of all, we take the steps we need to take when we need to take them. One step is to be doing ministry we find meaningful and important. As we do this ministry, we are learning about ourselves. Another step is to be purchasing a building to be a tool for ministry and a support center for spiritual growth.

Beyond that requires a personal journey by most of you, most of us. We need to ask ourselves, "What will I do now with what God has given me?" "How will I invest my life, my talents, however great or modest? These are not new questions. Many of you have responded to these questions already in your lives at least once or twice.

After the first of the year, I'm going to invite the congregation to join me planning and participating in a retreat of Invitation. This will be a real retreat to help us discern God's invitation for our lives. This will be a retreat to enable individuals to discern the meaning of their lives and, corporately, to discern the vision for our congregational life.

I have a vision for how, through our church, to let justice permeate our lives. It is through the movement toward wholeness. It is by each person seeking and discerning how to spend his/her life. It is by each of us deciding how to invest ourselves in a big dream or a small dream. It will be through our commitment to use our talents, interests, and opportunities to make the world a better place, to help people move toward wholeness.

The role of church is to support such investment. It is to enable this investment. It is to do this and, thereby, allow the church to speak with a collective voice to our world. This way, our congregation can speak to the larger Church and help it move out of deficit toward wholeness.

The story is told of a old Jewish rabbi who was dying. His name was Rabbi Zuscha. He was asked by one of his flock what he thought life after death would be like. "I know one thing, when I get there, I'm not going to be asked, 'Why weren't you Moses?' or 'Why weren't you David?' I'm going to be asked, 'Why weren't you Zuscha?'" Why weren't you all of yourself that you could have been?

Kathy and I have a friend who died this week. He had been suffering from multiple health concerns - including heart and kidney failure. He promised me, the last time we spoke, that he would not suffer. He controlled his destiny with the handgun he kept under his pillow. I don't know yet if he took his own life.

Bruce was a person of extreme contradictions. He was not liked by many people and he didn't like many people. He took active steps to keep people away including a threatening voice message on his phone and threatening signs at his house. He had an actually shooting range in his basement. He was pretty bigoted in many areas. At the same time, he was a brilliant man who loved culture and knew far more about history, opera especially, than most people I will ever know. His life and death remind me of the richness of a human life - the value of each of our lives and the importance of spending your life investing your talents. Poet W. H. Auden expresses this idea in a powerful way:

"God may reduce you
on Judgment Day
to tears of shame
reciting by heart
the poems you would
have written, had
your life been good."

It's the end of a church year and the beginning of a church year. It is a new phase of life for Crossroads Church. It will be a new year for each of us, one that may be full of hope, or may be full of fear. It may be a new year of uncertainty. Most likely,

it's a mixture of the three. Remember that peace in God is never to be confused with tranquility, far from that. It is a matter of wholeness -- some sense of understanding. It is not that we understand very much, but a sense that we are understood. In all that we do, we will find fulfillment only when what we do helps shape us and gives shape to our becoming instruments sounding fully God's *shalom*. "Lord, make us instruments of your peace." Amen.