



## Visiting Jesus in Prison. Touchpoint for November 18, 2020

### Matthew 25: 31-46 (MSG) The Sheep and the Goats

<sup>31-33</sup> “When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

<sup>34-36</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

*I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was in prison and you came to me.’*

<sup>37-40</sup> “Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’

<sup>41-43</sup> “Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’ the ones on his left, and say, ‘Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

*I was hungry and you gave me no meal,  
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,  
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,  
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.’*

<sup>44</sup> “Then those ‘goats’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?’

<sup>45</sup> “He will answer them, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.’

<sup>46</sup> “Then those ‘goats’ will be herded to their eternal doom, but the ‘sheep’ to their eternal reward.”

### **Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.**

*“...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, 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.”*

The story Jesus tells is set within the scene of a final judgment. And what we have tended to do is build a whole theology around the scene rather than the relationships within the scene. We’ve gotten caught up in the staging of the story rather than the story itself.

You see, I don’t think this passage is as much about the next life as it is about this life. I think Jesus uses the mythology of a judgment scene, which was common in his era, in the same way our parents used our first and middle names when we were growing up. I mean, when my parents started a sentence with, “James Arthur!!!” instead of “Jim” I knew I had better listen.

So, I think when Jesus sets a story within the framework of a final judgment, he's telling us what is to follow is pretty important. And if we actually read the passage, some interesting things get reversed in what is our common understanding of Christianity. You know, it's amazing what happens to you... to me... when one actually reads the text. A couple of examples:

First of all, the sheep don't know they are sheep. And the goats don't know they are goats. Neither of them made a conscious decision about the merits of what they were doing or weren't doing. Neither of them made a conscious decision in regards to the reward and punishment of their actions. They just were. Which makes it kind of hard to use this text as a basis to demand that people make better decisions.

And a second thing about this passage is where Jesus posits himself.

Now it wasn't until just a few years ago that I would preach on, and I would hear others preach on, how we have to be little Christ's to those who are hungry and hurting in the world. We need to be Christ, we need to bring Christ, we need to imitate Christ, in relationship to the downtrodden of the world. You know, 'what would Jesus do?' in relationship to THOSE people and the implication being that I was then to be Jesus, the Christ, to those UNFORTUNATE people.

But then I actually read the text. You know, it's amazing what happens to you, to me, when one actually reads the text. Christ isn't saying to be Christ to others. He doesn't posit himself with those doing the feeding or the visiting... No, he says he is the one who is hungry. He is the one who is sick. In other words, we aren't Christ to them, they are Christ to us.

And now suddenly everything changes.

This passage that I always thought was about separation, you know, sheep and goats, the good from the bad, those who have Christ and those who don't. Is now one that drives me into the lives of others. It says I primarily meet the Christ in others.

Let me give you an example:

We have children living in cages on our border. And the common Christian question is "How can we be Christ to those children?" But in light of this passage, that is the wrong question. The question should be, "What is Christ saying to us from those cages?"

That old bracelet so popular in the late nineties, "WWJD". "What would Jesus do?" Got it all wrong. The question isn't "What **WOULD** Jesus do?", and the implication being we should do the same... No, the better question is "What **IS** Jesus doing in those cages?" Why is Jesus being caged? The question isn't how can we be Christ to them? But what is Christ trying to say to those of us outside of those cages? What is Christ asking us to see about our values, our culture, our way of life that we think it is ok to put innocent children in cages? What is it we hold so valuable, that we would rather have Christ in a cage, than give it up?

Remember Jesus' words, "I was in prison – in a cage – and you visited me." What cages is he trying to show us that we live in? Even as we scream, "Freedom!" Or to bring it even closer to home, and I don't mean to be a Debby Downer here, no offense to the Debbys of the world, but you know those people who stand on the street corner and beg? And I see them and try to avoid eye contact with them, even as I ask myself "How should I be Christ to them?" Well, I'm asking the wrong question.

The question I should be asking instead is, "What is Christ saying to me as he sits at that intersection?" Or, "What is Christ trying to say to me as she stands on that corner?"

OUCH!!!!!!

You know, I think I liked things a whole lot more when I didn't actually read the text. When I just assumed I knew what the bible passage meant. But it's amazing what happens to you...to me... when one actually reads the text.

What's fascinating and interesting, as well as disconcerting to me about this passage is that I always thought this passage was about who was closest to Christ, who was the most aligned with Christ, and how I could determine it. Who was closest to Christ? Was it the sheep or the goats?

Well, the answer is neither. Neither the sheep or the goats are closest to Christ. It's the hungry, the sick, the naked, the imprisoned. These are the ones who are closest to Christ; these are the ones who are nearest and dearest.

And so, there is another reversal: This passage isn't trying to tell us how this earthly life gets us into the Kingdom of Heaven. This passage is trying to tell us how the Kingdom of Heaven is living amongst us in this life.

Let me repeat that: This passage isn't trying to tell us how this earthly life gets us into the Kingdom of Heaven. This passage is trying to tell us how the Kingdom of Heaven is living amongst us in this life. Now, I don't know why that should surprise me. You see, where Matthew's gospel has Christ positing himself at the end of his ministry – with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the imprisoned – isn't any different than where Matthew has Christ positing himself at the beginning of his ministry.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst. Blessed are they who mourn. Blessed are the persecuted...the beaten.” God, it seems, is remarkably consistent.

And now this meal, makes even more sense.

If Christ is with the broken, the hurting, the lost and forsaken, then where else would he be but with the denier, the betrayer, the frightened and forlorn. For whatever reason, this seems to be where the Christ prefers to be: with the broken. Maybe that's why he says in this meal, “This is my body, broken for you.” Christ takes on the brokenness of the world. Christ becomes the brokenness of the world. So that we in our brokenness are not left alone or helpless. And now my brokenness and the brokenness of others is not a point of separation, but of unity, of healing and wholeness.

I don't need to be healed from my brokenness. My brokenness becomes the source of my healing. For here in this meal...brokenness meets brokenness...brokenness enters brokenness... and healing oneness is the result.

And now, maybe what that Christ on the street corner is trying to say to me is that I am broken too. And maybe her witness isn't just to the brokenness of her life, or even the brokenness of our society's systems, maybe she is a witness to the brokenness in me, the brokenness I carry in myself.

And maybe, just maybe, she is telling me that I don't have to go **only** to a church or Zoom worship to find Holy Communion with Christ...

but that I might just find Holy Communion with Christ ... on a street corner.

You know, it's amazing what happens to you...to me... when one actually reads the text.

Amen

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Songs**

### **Be Still**

Be Still, know that I am God

### **Come O Lord and Set Us Free**

Come, O Lord and set us free.

Give/Bring your people peace.

Come, O Lord and set us free.

Come Lord Jesus, Come.

1. And take our guilt away. Give us your pardon Lord.
2. Free from our self-obsession. Free from each fond possession.
3. Free to affirm each other...as sister and as brother
4. Reshape the world you made. Let what your hand created...be always celebrated.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

## **Lord's Prayer**

### **The Meal**

#### **Let Us Break Bread Together**

Let us 1) break bread, 2) drink wine, 3) praise God  
together on our knees (repeat)

When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,  
O Lord, have mercy on me

## **Benediction**

### **A Blessing**

May the Lord bless you.  
May the Lord protect you and guide you.  
May His strength uphold you.  
His light shine upon you.  
His peace surround you.  
His love enfold you.  
May the Lord bless you.