



Damn Serious – Touchpoint for November 22, 2023

Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSVUE) 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 who 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 brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who 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.”

Psalm 100 : A Psalm of Thanksgiving (NRSVUE)

¹ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² Serve the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³ Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him; bless his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

I was taught growing up that God was loving. I was baptized in a Presbyterian church that taught that a person is welcome without a caveat or agenda. Then at 14, I learned about salvation from Campus Crusade and was jumped into the gang. The entry to the gang required a statement of loyalty called the Sinners Prayer and the

initiation was witnessing door to door in Dallas's inner city. I was 14 and attending Explo '72, the Christian Woodstock. The thought of being saved from hell gave me a dopamine rush that I interpreted as being filled with the Spirit. I was a normal adolescent who breathed sin. Learning about salvation and the danger of eternal damnation dealt by a God who loved me sounded preferable. After that, life was filled with euphoric weekends going to a Jesus movement coffee house and getting drunk on the Holy Spirit. I belonged to a gang, I had protection, and I was on the good side called heaven. There were a lot of end zone celebrations.

In most interpretations, the weight of this parable is in the last sentence about weeping and gnashing of teeth in eternal punishment. Sounds horrific. I pity a Sunday school teacher required to use this parable as a lesson for children. People die, they either go to hell or heaven depending upon whether they fed somebody or not. Most of the postings on this passage seem to assume the eternal judgment piece.

Richard Rohr says this sheep-and-goat story is Jesus presenting the severity of ignoring suffering in the world in a dualistic a way. It appears to me Jesus is leading us into non-dualistic thinking. Instead, we use this parable as support for dualist, heaven or hell thinking. The fear of eternal damnation would cause anybody to weep and gnash. We would need to know Jesus the *human being*, to truly understand his heart in these words. Maybe the relationship we are developing here is with the Bible, not the person of Jesus. However, I think we are seeing the passion of Jesus's heart.

Have you ever been in a situation where you just couldn't convey the severity of your concerns to someone? Maybe you've used a life and death statement to get your point across, to finally be heard, to know how serious you are. It causes me to think that we really don't know Jesus, *the man*. We can't! At least not the person of Jesus; his daily idiosyncrasies and style. We know his big talk, but we don't know his small talk. But we know Jesus in this parable. He was serious, damn serious. It was life and death to him.

Let's just empty ourselves from this tragic conclusion of eternal damnation for a second. What other questions arise from this parable but are overshadowed by our eyes going to eternal punishment?

The sheep inherit the kingdom prepared just for them since the foundations of the world. I can hear Calvinists cheering. "Did Jesus say some are going to heaven and some are not, and we wouldn't know the elect until the end of time?" What a great screenplay for someone to write! Losers and winners. Dualistic thinking. It's been done. Over and over again.

The sheep are righteous, perfect, because they partner with God in what God is about, and the goats are sent off with the devil and his angels, who are 100% bad. Is that the way humans are? Those who were created in God's image are either 100% good or 100% bad? That would indeed be tragic, if God's children were created in dualistic fashion, that the God who is love created an entire group accursed. Perhaps there are demons not created by God. Shapeshifters coming as goats in sheep's clothing. Wait a minute! I think I may have known one or two of them!

In all seriousness, I see a parable about a kingdom where God is king, and this God of love has been accepted as such.

This God of love is serious about compassion. So serious, that the one sent as a revelation of God's compassion knows the Father's heart for the hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, and imprisoned. So serious, he speaks to the neglect of the least of these. Neither the sheep nor the goats saw God in the suffering of the

least of these. If this ethos of this kingdom is a dualistic, heaven-and-hell theology, then yes, it's about sheep and the goats.

It causes me to ask myself, have I not evolved from euphoria and intellectual devotion? Have I become spiritually self-indulgent and neglected those God shows preference for in suffering? I can tell you that as a preacher, my words have not neglected them. My actions are what I would prefer to think about.

Perhaps we are called to be one with God not only in truth, but also in the co-laboring of God's divine passion. Jesus is serious about this. Damn serious. No wonder eternal damnation is stated – it's the only way we may listen.

I'm going to close with something that happened when I was Director of Christian Growth Services at Remuda Ranch Center for Disordered Eating.

I hired different speakers and musicians to lead us in monthly chapel for the staff. We had four different chapels around the facility. Stu shared a story about some American Christian businessmen invited to take a trip to India. Young Life was looking at expanding globally. While there, they met a group of sisters from Mother Teresa's order. Across the road was a Muslim group. One day the sisters were donning traditional Muslim clothes and the men in their suits were confused. One asked them, "What are you doing today?" One of the sisters said, "We are going across the street to celebrate one of our brothers' festivals." Even more confused, one businessman said, "I'm surprised you would partake in something like this! After all, you follow Jesus." The sister said with great compassion, "Oh, the Jesus we love, we see in them."

There was an employee who was bothered by Stu's message in the first chapel of the day. Stu had pointed out that Jesus never asked people to worship him, but rather to follow him. The employee followed us all day, drilling Stu with questions. He found us having lunch in Wickenburg, which isn't difficult, and Stu tried one last time to answer his attacks by asking him, "If you met a starving person on the street and had the choice of giving him food and saving his life or telling him about salvation, which would you do? The man without hesitation said, "Salvation, of course!"

Jesus must have thought it was so important, that he concludes with eternal damnation as a consequence, so he *must* have been serious... serious about the gospel being about caring for the vulnerable. Worrying about whether someone is going to hell or not becomes less important than salvation for those who are experiencing hell now.

Jesus was serious. Damn serious.

Amen.

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

You Lord Are in this Place

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in 1)...this place.
2)...my heart. 3)...my mind. 4)...my life.
Your presence fills it.
Your presence is peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Lead Me, Lord

(Discovery Singers)

Lead me, Lord. Lead me in thy righteousness.
Make thy way plain before my face.
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord only, that makest me to dwell in safety.

The Meal

Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lukin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you.
And give you peace....
The Lord make his face to shine upon you.
And be gracious unto you.
The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen