

“I’d Have Baked a Cake!”
A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday
Matthew 25:31-46

Well, here we are, on the last Sunday of the year. The last Sunday of the *Christian Year*, that is. I haven’t always followed the Christian calendar, but I love it. I love the way we anticipate the coming of Christ in Advent, and celebrate for twelve full days during Christmas. I love the way his light shines into the world on Epiphany, and gets brighter and brighter in the weeks that follow. I can’t say that I love walking beside Jesus on his journey to the cross during Lent, but I can see why I need to do it. It makes my celebration of Easter that much more joyful—fifty days’ worth of alleluias. And then, of course, Pentecost, and all the Sundays after that, Sundays in which we get to be disciples, following Jesus, hearing him preach and teach, watching him help and heal, becoming more convinced with each passing week that he really is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And then we come to this Sunday, when we crown him with many crowns and watch as he takes his place on the royal throne.

In Matthew’s Gospel it is a particularly splendid vision.

Jesus has been fending off the scribes and Pharisees for several chapters now: answering their questions, calling their bluff, and warning them and his disciples of the devastation that is about to come on all the earth. But now he shifts our gaze to the time just after the End, when the smoke has cleared, and all the nations of the world are standing there blinking in the bright sunshine of eternity. That’s when the Son of Man will come in all his glory, Jesus says, and all his angels with him. He will sit on the throne of glory, and the light will be dazzling—flashing forth from that throne and reflecting off the iridescent wings of the angels in beams of purple and green and gold.

Everybody will fall into the long line leading up to the throne and the judgment will begin. For one wonderful or terrible moment each person will look into the eyes of the King, and with a flick of his gaze, a nod of his head, he will direct them to one side of the throne or the other. And then, when the judgment is over, he will pronounce the verdict. You know how it goes:

To those on his right—the sheep—he will say, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” but to those on his left—the goats—he will say, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” The difference between the sheep and the goats—some might say the difference between heaven and hell—is that the sheep looked on the suffering of the world and had compassion and the goats did not. But listen to this: in both cases the sheep and the goats are surprised by the verdict. “When did we see you in need and help you?” the sheep ask. “When did we see you and *not* help?” the goats ask. And in their question the importance of the word *seeing* begins to emerge. “I was there,” Jesus says. “I was in every hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, sick, and imprisoned person you ever encountered. You just didn’t see me.”

You can almost hear their response.

“But Lord, if we’d known it was you we would have acted differently. We would have thrown a party, would have baked a cake. We would have treated you like the king you are!” Which is just what Jesus doesn’t want. He doesn’t want people to treat him differently than they treat everybody else. He wants them to treat everybody else as they would treat him. And so Christ the King has come to us disguised as those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, strange, sick, and imprisoned. He has identified with them so

closely that the way we treat them is the way we treat him, and what he is watching for, always, is whether or not we will see the need before us and respond with compassion.

Let me take just a moment to say a word about that. Those scribes and Pharisees Jesus has been arguing with lived by the words of Leviticus 19:2. It was practically their motto: “You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” They believed that holiness was what it was all about and that when the Day of Judgment came people would be separated into two groups on the basis of how holy they had been. There are still people who approach religion in that way. But in the ministry of Jesus it becomes clear that there is something even more important than holiness, and that is compassion—the ability to feel with other people, to know their misery, to share their suffering, and then to do something about it. In Luke 6:36 he says, “You shall be *compassionate*, as your Father in heaven is *compassionate*.” Marcus Borg has pointed out that Jesus appears to be taking the Pharisees’ favorite verse and twisting it into a new shape. Or maybe he is twisting it back into its original shape. Maybe compassion was what God meant when he talked about holiness and it’s only these scribes and Pharisees who have turned it into some kind of purity contest.¹

But compassion doesn’t happen without seeing. Just a few weeks ago we were weeping over the devastation of Hurricane Harvey. Some members of our church actually went to Texas to see the damage for themselves, and every one of them came back with a sense of urgency about helping. They said what people always seem to say in such circumstances: “You can’t believe it till you’ve seen it for yourself.” Seeing is believing. It changes things. It moves it from your head to your heart, causes you to feel it and want

¹ These thoughts are from the chapter on “Jesus, Compassion, and Politics” in Marcus Borg’s excellent book, *Seeing Jesus again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 46-68.

to do something about it. Do you remember what God said to Moses when he spoke from the burning bush? “I have *seen* the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.” God sees, God hears, God knows, and then God does. But it begins with seeing. It always seems to begin with seeing.

“When did we see you and do something for you?” the sheep ask the King. They ask him three times, and in each case he responds by saying, “Whenever you saw the suffering of the least of these my brothers and sisters and did something about it, you did it to me.” “When did we see you and not do anything for you?” the goats ask. “Whenever you failed to see their suffering and do something about it,” he answers, “you failed to do it to me.”

I went to seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and while I was there I participated in a class exercise called “The Plunge.” As a way to experience the plight of the poor firsthand my professor challenged us to spend 24 hours on the streets of the city. We were each assigned a partner—I got Roger—and told that we could bring 65 cents apiece: just enough for bus fare to get us downtown. Before we went on the Plunge Roger and I spent four or five days getting ready, which meant that we didn’t shower or shave or change clothes in all that time. By Friday afternoon we looked the part. We saved 65 cents apiece by catching a ride downtown with a guy in a blue van who laughed when he heard what we were up to and then reached down beside his seat and pulled out a nearly empty beer can. He dumped the rest of it on the front of my shirt and said, “There, that’ll make you smell right!” So there we were, on the streets of Louisville, ragged, unshaven, and stinking of beer. That’s how the adventure began.

For the first few hours it felt like an adventure. I put a bottle cap in one shoe, forcing me to walk with a limp, thinking that would make me look more authentic. We saw the mayor of Louisville getting out of a limousine and tried to catch up with him to beg for change. We panhandled outside the fancy theater downtown and one of my seminary professors walked right by me, without so much as a glance. We ended up in the Salvation Army shelter just before midnight with twenty other men who lay there stinking and belching and snoring. It was a long night.

The next morning we got up and out of that place as quickly as we could and spent the rest of the day wandering the streets. It was sometime that morning that I noticed people weren't looking at me. I was sitting on a bench outside a big department store, enjoying the sunshine, when a mother and her daughter came walking toward me. I smiled and said hello but the mother at least looked right through me as if I had become invisible. And once I noticed it in her I noticed that everyone was doing it. They were looking around me, or past me, or through me, but they weren't looking at me. If they had looked at me they might have seen me, and if they had seen me they might have had to acknowledge my presence, and if they acknowledged my presence then they might have had to do something for me. It was so much easier just to pretend they didn't see, just to look around, or past, or through. Just to walk briskly by with their heads held high while I disappeared a little piece at a time.

At noon that day Roger and I went to the Cathedral of the Assumption on Fifth Street because we heard they gave out sandwiches after mass. I sat on a back pew, listening to the young priest deliver a very earnest homily from Luke 15. There were the scribes and Pharisees again, complaining about Jesus because he welcomed sinners and

tax collectors and ate with them. “Jesus kept bad company,” the priest said. “He welcomed sinners and tax collectors. He rendered himself guilty by association. Here at the Cathedral of the Assumption we’re trying to do what Jesus would do. We’re trying to welcome those he would welcome. Some of our parishioners don’t like it very much. They wish we would turn the homeless away. But if Jesus wouldn’t turn them away then neither can we.” When the mass was over he walked back to where I was sitting. “What’s your name?” he asked. “Jim,” I said. He said, “Good to meet you, Jim,” and stuck out his hand to shake mine. It was the first time in 24 hours that anyone had offered to touch me and I felt a lump rise in my throat, making it hard to ask the question that had been on my mind since I walked in the place.

“Do you all give away any food?”

This priest looked, he saw, he felt compassion. It’s what God wants from us, and according to Jesus it can mean the difference between heaven and hell. I suppose that’s why I continue to think about how I can help the homeless in the city where I minister now. Some people probably do those things because they are genuinely good people. Some people probably do them to relieve their guilt. But this is why I do them: I do them because I am haunted by this parable, and I will always be haunted by it. I’m not haunted so much by the idea of the “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” as I am by the idea that the homeless beggar I just walked by on the street outside was Christ himself.

And I didn’t even look.

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