

Invisible Christ

A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli for A Sermon for Every Sunday, Reign of Christ Sunday.

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Last week's Revised Common Lectionary passage ended with the unfaithful servant being thrown into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt. 25.30) And today, the Lectionary gives us the parable immediately following, a scene of judgment including eternal fire and punishment for the hapless goats. In Matthew's telling, this parable is the culmination of the last long speech attributed to Jesus during his final week. Jesus so-called "triumphal entry" to Jerusalem occurs back in chapter 21 and by the time we get to the end of our chapter (25), things have gotten weird—and pretty intense. Jesus has turned the tables on the money changers in the temple, cursed a fig tree, artfully dodged challenges from the temple leaders, cried about the state of Jerusalem, and spoken truth (in no uncertain terms) to the powers that would persist in their hypocrisy and injustice against the vulnerable and those in their care; the parables that conclude Jesus' last speech are all about keeping eyes open and remaining faithful while the "master" is away. The parables, like the words Jesus has for the corrupt leaders of the day, are not trying to "make nice." The point is that there are behaviors absolutely inconsistent with the Kin-dom of heaven and those things need to change. Jesus has spent his public life teaching, through his words and actions, the

ways of God’s mercy, compassion, and love—the ways of the Kin-dom. But here Jesus knows that his death is near and so there is pleading urgency, a fearful foreboding that presses for a decision, for action. Keep in mind that this gospel was written for a community more than 80 years removed from the flesh and blood person of Jesus. Instilling a sense of urgency to act, shaking the community to remember the ethics of the Kin-dom and whom they are called to serve is part of Matthew’s rhetorical point.

Notice that in our parable today Jesus isn’t telling us to judge other people; he is telling us to love and to care for them—especially the poor and vulnerable. That is the urgency, the thing that needs more attention. But we humans are really good at giving attention to assigning “goatness” to others and to ourselves. Anyone been told they're gonna join me in the goat pen? I don't mean to be flip, but this is one of those places where I laugh to keep from crying. Instead of hearing Jesus' words in a way that awakes human conscience and leads to greater acts of care, mercy, and justice, how often these words have been used, instead, to do judge others and do harm. And for those of us who do hear the call to care, we may be confused and distressed by the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the throwing into outer darkness, and casting into eternal fire and punishment that we find here. How can we read this parable in a way that allows us to maintain both its urgent call to

accountability and action and our belief in a loving and merciful God? In other words, is there a way to read this story of Christ on the throne as a story of a benevolent ruler? Or not?

Based on my reading of scripture—through the lens of the crucified and risen Christ—I understand our lives as a journey that continues even into the next life. That journey is made up of choices. The choices we make have consequences for our own lives and for the lives of others. Some choices lead to greater love, peace, and justice. Some human choices result in weeping and angry regret (gnashing of teeth); some human choices lead to a hellish place that has the potential to destroy and disfigure OR to purify. My conviction is that the violence in the parables is more descriptive than prescriptive—that the stories are trying to tell us what we are doing to ourselves and to whole communities if we persist in making life-threatening, destructive, choices. Grounding all of this is the belief that God does not leave nor forsake us. (Mt. 28.20) Ever. God is with us in this world and into the next. Grace is always extended. But we must choose whether to open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, to receive that which is given. If we turn to God, we will live.

I know there are good debates to be had on this theological reading of the punishments we read about in the Gospels. But when I think of my own life and the places that destructive, unloving choices have led me, when I think of the consequences of unjust, discriminatory, and greedy laws and policies upon whole groups of people and upon our planet, when I think of the choices so many make to turn to violence and revenge and of the devastation wrought as a result, when I think of the ways that whole societies can get lured into blindly supporting a socio-economic or political system that is literally killing other people, only to realize after the fact the guilt and hellish consequences of their cheerful ignorance, I cannot help but conclude that weeping, gnashing of teeth, darkness and fire are simply what follow in the wake of human sin—not because God is punishing us, but because human beings have not heeded God’s call to wake up, to pay attention, to care, to forgive, to love. It is this call that I hear in our parable today, a call to shake off the distractions that keep us from seeing the needs of others, the injustice of our systems, the destruction of our choices.

Failure to see is the thing the sheep and the goats have in common. Christ was invisible to them all. And it may make us uneasy to consider that we likely pass by Christ in so many guises on any given day. All of us have a need for “new eyes,” a need to submit to the painful process of having our consciousness raised, of

coming face to face with our complicity and our failures and then to do something different with the insight we gain. Today's parable calls us to that need for the scales to fall from our eyes like Paul on the road to Damascus, so that we might see the harm we are doing or the good we have failed to do—and then to repent and live and love more freely and sacrificially.

But that isn't the end of the story. The parable also encourages us by highlighting the ways that we likely serve Christ without ever even knowing it! Today we are reminded that even with all our chronic vision problems we can act in love and compassion. Dorothy Day, who knew something about putting her faith into action on behalf of the poor, talked about the ways that it is impossible for anyone who has real charity in their heart NOT to serve Christ. She talks about the fact that even some who don't know Christ or who have forgotten him will find themselves well loved. She recognizes that even some who think they hate Christ are serving him, disguised in suffering humanity. Perhaps, since we have been tipped off to the fact that Christ will often be invisible to us—or perhaps simply because it is the right thing to do—we might consider doing our best to be kind to, to care for, to even serve everyone we encounter. We might simply do what we can each moment, to the best of our ability. The truth is that the smallest act of kindness can make all the difference in a life.

Sometimes, we may be blessed to perceive the difference we've made. But sometimes—and perhaps most of the time—we don't see the results of our acts of love, mercy, kindness, and justice. We cannot always see the ways that a note of support, a courageous witness, a smile or embrace can change everything for someone else. You might not even see the person upon whom you have had an impact; you may not know that you have done anything of consequence. But today, we are reminded that even when you don't see, God does. The invisible Christ is there in the heart of the one whose life you have touched. And God honors every act of care, every gentle word, every honest attempt to be human in a world that tempts us to the opposite.

It is rather easy to get preoccupied with the heady stuff of heaven and hell in the scripture and to miss the urgent call to simple acts of love and justice. For most people in the world, the daily question is not what life will be like on the other side of death, but whether there is hope for a better life on this side of death. That is the thing that Jesus seems to want us to attend to—sharing in word and deed the hope, healing, mercy, and love that characterize life in God's Kin-dom with and on behalf of those who need it most. If we do that, trusting in God's grace to help us see and respond, then we don't need to worry about what happens later.

On this last Sunday of the Christian year, traditionally celebrated as “Reign of Christ” Sunday, I give thanks that the One who will hold us accountable finally is the same One who loves us most fully. I give thanks that the One on the throne is also the One who draws near to us in poverty and vulnerability. I give thanks for the opportunities to serve the invisible Christ, opportunities that keep us connected to our humanity, humility, and dignity as beloved children of God. And I give thanks for the Kin-dom of God and for the One who won’t let us forget it is where we truly belong.

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