

## ENCOUNTERING JESUS

*Matthew 25:31–46—The Judgement of the Nations: 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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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.” 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.” 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?” 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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*

Thank you for indulging me in the parable retelling. I think sometimes we read these stories, and we don't see ourselves as part of what's happening—the drama.

I am convinced that this parable—this parable that is a story about the end of time, an apocalyptic story—is really about the meaning of life more than it is about the end of time. I know, for centuries, final judgment has been preached on this passage. The image of standing before Christ to account for our lives, all the things we've said, all the things we've done, all the things we've kept secret, and now everything is public. It's been used as a motivational technique for conversion. It's been a guilt trip for some to encourage believing. And if we agree with this interpretation of the passage, it's good because we are entering Advent, and this would be the ultimate Santa Claus message. You know, *you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why*. The great judge is keeping a list.

However, if we spend our lives trying only to figure out who the good sheep are and who the bad goats are—if we spend our energy and our treasure searching for who is worthy and who is unworthy, who is lovable and who is unlovable—we will miss the point. And the real tragedy of missing the point will be a life that is sad indeed. But an even greater tragedy, we will have missed the chance to encounter Jesus in our lives.

Our story about sheep and goats comes to us just as we are wrapping up the church year. You know, the church year is different from the calendar year, right? This is the last Sunday—this is the equivalent of December 31<sup>st</sup>. And next Sunday, a new church year will begin. It will be the first Sunday of Advent. We are wrapping things up here, aren't we? We are still trying to get a handle on this particular phase of stewardship. By the way, contrary to what may have been rumored, stewardship at Bush Hill is really doing pretty wonderful. Over three-fourths of you turned in an estimate of giving card. That is a record, I think. We are bringing together the whole idea of our conversation about what it means to be a church—specifically, a church which has its mission defined and motivated by the Gospel. It's driven by the good news.

This story of ours is unfolding, and we have a parable now that some believe is only about visiting the sick, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, befriending the stranger, and doing prison ministry. That's a pretty nice list, isn't it? I mean, that's manageable. I could memorize it, and I could do half of that stuff and I would feel really great about myself. Do these things and you will inherit eternal life, right? Surprise! Neither the goats nor the sheep got it right. The goats didn't do what they were supposed to, and even though the sheep did what they were supposed to, they didn't see Jesus. Both groups, I think, probably behaved pretty similarly. They lived by a code or a formula. They read their Bibles and tried to live up to its high ethics and standards. In fact, I am guessing the goats could probably have accounted for and proven every righteous act they ever performed. I don't think they worried when the end of the year came and the Presbytery published their annual giving as a congregation. They knew already they were in the top ten or twenty churches.

The key to all of this, though, is something much more important. It is the key, in fact, to understanding faith, and it is the key to our discussion about this church's vision and mission—wait for it—that key is: are we willing to allow Christ's mercy to flow through us to any who are in need? Are we willing to be a conduit for the grace of Jesus Christ? Think about that. A conduit—so the source is somewhere else. The power is somewhere else. We are just the channel, not nearly as satisfying as doing it ourselves, is it? We just get to be the vessel that is used.

Actually this is the key to any discussion of what the Gospel means, and it is also the key to any discussion about God or any discussion about anything that has ultimate and lasting meaning. And there is a Gospel meaning—a divine purpose here for us today. When we serve Christ, it's because he *is* Christ. So encountering the shepherd is critical. It's crucial to our understanding of what it means to be a believer. Let me put it another way. Because of Jesus, we have the opportunity to live side by side with other sheep.

That's it in a nutshell. But here is the other shoe dropping. Contrary to what you have been told, there is no salvation when we only seek a personal relationship with Jesus in order to save ourselves. That's right. Surprise! When faith is self-serving, it is no longer faith. It is merely a means to an end. So let us be clear. It is what Christ does for us that is salving. What we do for Christ is not salvation. It's not even our purpose. Our purpose, again, is so simple it eludes us. Our purpose is to recognize Christ in one another, to be able to perceive the love of Christ that is everywhere in this world and in every one of us. And our mission is—and these are your words—to offer ourselves to those who are in need, physically and spiritually; and then I believe the fleshing out of that is as if every one of them were literally Christ to us, a Jesus encounter.

I remember the first time, in another town, I had a chance to work at a real soup kitchen that was in the neighborhood where everybody needed it. And I remember being at the board meeting discussing how we were going to remake this soup kitchen and how the director told us we were no longer going to stand behind long tables and serve people as they came through. We were going to put table cloths and candles and flowers on the tables. And when people came in, we were going to be their waitresses and waiters, and they were going to sit down as if they were at a paying restaurant. And they were going to place an order, and we were going to bring the food to them. Now the folks on the board who were a little more conservative than Attila the Hun wanted to know why. It's going to take more people; it's going to be slower. And the director said, "Because every one of those people is our opportunity to serve Jesus himself. If Jesus came in here, we would treat him with that dignity and that same respect. And that's what they deserve." It completely changed that soup kitchen. It was never the same again.

When our faith becomes self-serving, it is not faith any longer. Our mission here is to offer ourselves to one another because we are all in need. Our mission here is to make that self-offering again—wait for it—to make that self-offering even when we don't see the image of Christ in one another or in one another's needs. When we can't see Jesus in one another, our mission is to offer the help anyway. The sheep helped even though they didn't recognize Christ. The goats didn't help. But they had the same problem. They didn't recognize Christ either. There is new life meaning for us—a new purpose—when we decide to be done with all the "who is worthy" and "who is lovable" question.

You know, I have a little joke that most of the people that spell their name the way I spell my name are usually scapegoats or the brunt of a joke. Think about movie stars with a first name like mine. But there is one guy who is a hero. He and I spell our names the same way. His name is Carl Rogers. And here is what he said, "We are to offer unconditional, positive regard for one another." Unconditional, positive regard—that's who we are and are still becoming—because the image of Christ is so precious in each of us. Amen.