

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
April 7, 2019
“Encountering Christ in the Flesh”
Matthew 25:31-46

This is the last of the parables of Jesus that we will hear this Lent. In part, because it is the very last parable in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus tells before the events of the crucifixion begin to unfold.

It's also one of the most familiar passages in all of Matthew's gospel. You probably don't have to be a church goer to recognize the phrase, "the least of these..."

Although you may need to be immersed in church to know who the sheep are, and who the goats are, and which you better hope you are.

You really don't want to mess this up either. Do you want to be a goat or a sheep? One gets eternal life and the other is turned to dust in the eternal fire. So...**choose but choose wisely! *[For as the true grail will bring you life, the false grail will take it from you.]***

Goat or sheep? Sheep or goat?

You'd better get it all cleared up and squared away.

At least, that's how we have often come at this whole heaven and hell business, haven't we? Get it squared away. Make sure you know. I mean, "If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure where you'd go?" ...

[“With every head bowed and every eye closed...

let me see your hands. Do you know which you'd be?”]

We've talked about heaven and hell as if they are something you just have to get all nailed down. Get your insurance policy in place, then you don't have to think about it from then on. Get your sheep or goats all straightened out, and you are all set.

Only that's not the story Jesus tells here. In Jesus' parable neither the sheep nor the goats had any idea they were one or the other. Did you notice that? The sheep had no idea they were serving Christ all that time, and the goats had no idea they were missing Christ.

They both find out

in the sorting... when all is revealed.

And if that isn't enough to make you a bit nervous... then you need to watch what happens if you choose the wrong cup in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade." It's not pretty. I'm telling you.

You don't want to find out that you've been filling up and drinking from the wrong cup all this time.

If you haven't seen that movie, Indiana and some bad dudes are looking for the holy grail, and at the critical moment, they find a room full of grails and they have to choose between all these beautiful chalices.

The bad guy chooses a golden goblet that looks fit for a king... and you think he's found eternal life. Only what happens to him... isn't pretty. He drinks from it and is turned to dust.

But when it's Indy's turn, he finds one little goblet lurking in the shadows of all the beautiful ornate goblets. This chalice is plain, simple, smaller, and forgotten. That's the one he takes.

"This looks like the cup of a carpenter" he says,
And... he "chose... wisely."

It's a metaphor for what Jesus is saying here. The eternal life of God comes to us in the very least of these:

in the hungry and thirsty,
the naked and sick,

the prisoner (those that break the law),
the stranger (or in today's terms, foreigners or immigrants, legal or illegal... it doesn't matter.)

Pretty much in any person that might be thought of as a drain on society, or anyone that is an outsider in any way. They are the least of these Jesus is talking about. They are where the very flesh and blood of Christ is hiding among us.

But remember, neither the sheep nor the goats knew that. The sheep didn't recognize Christ in the least of these any more than the goats did.

The essential difference between the sheep and the goats was not that one recognized Christ and the other didn't.

The essential difference
between the sheep and the goats,
was in what they did and didn't do.

Neither one recognized Christ. But one reached out to love the hardest to love anyway. The sheep treated these unholy "others" with dignity anyway.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't think the goats were cold-hearted. They felt bad for the least of these too... just like the sheep. Only the goats didn't have the time nor energy to go out and do something about it, and so they missed the cup of eternal life.

Discovering the holy presence of Christ happens when we get up and go to the least of these ourselves.

It happens in the encounter itself.

It happens flesh to flesh, with another human being, even when that human being doesn't seem like anything close to the King of Kings.

There's another ancient Celtic saint whose story reminds me of this. His name was Aidan.

Aidan was a monk at Iona, that ancient holy island off the West Coast of Scotland I visited last year. He lived in the 6th century when Iona was a Christian outpost at the edge of Scotland.

In Aidan's time, Scotland was still run by various small tribes and religions. One of the most powerful of these was North Umbria on the far eastern shore of Scotland.

Now the King of North Umbria was sent into exile and ended up all the way over at Iona. The community at Iona cared for him, taught him about Jesus, and in the process, the King became a Christian. So, once he was reestablished on the throne, he asked the Iona community to send some of their monks to tell the rest of his kingdom about Christ.

This was not an easy ask. It would be hard to work among these warrior people. They were more interested in telling stories of conquests while they ate and drank at great banquets than attend a worship service and learn about Christ. Not to mention, many Christian priests had already been killed trying to share their faith.

So, it would take a courageous person.

And the monks at Iona chose a hard, strong, courageous monk named Corman.

Corman was a lot of talk before he left. He said he could make all the people of Scotland become obedient to Christ. He would conquer their kingdom for Christ. Corman had fight in him... and went out with that fighting spirit.

But just a few months later, Corman came back. He told all the other monks how uncivilized and savage the people were. "They're a lost cause," he said. "They're too brutish to learn anything."

[Do you hear that subtle dehumanization in his language? That's almost always how the least of these are talked about. In some small way, they are described as less than human, or even more like animals than people. It happens all the time, even today. Listen for it.]

Aidan, of course, was there listening to all this. He was a part of the community. And the more he heard Corman talk, the more he couldn't stand it any longer. He stood up and said with a firm voice, "Brother, it seems to me that you were too hard.... You expected too much too soon.... You cannot force people to be where you want them to be without showing them what they are missing by remaining as they are."

There was a stunned silence. Aidan was known for being really gentle. He was a generous man, a man of prayer and dedication. Corman couldn't believe he was being challenged, and especially by Aidan.

Besides, what did Aidan know?

He would get eaten alive by these warring people.

"All right, then. You try!" Corman said.

And that's what Aidan did. Only he went about it very differently. He didn't go as a conquering missionary, but a pilgrim witness. Wherever he went, to towns or villages, Aidan didn't ride on horses, but walked... along the road,

to meet people where they were,

to share stories together,

and to get to know one another.

Although Aidan was often disturbed by the gluttony and violence of the people, he didn't approach them as savage brutes. He approached them as beloved children of God.

There's a story about a time when King of North Umbria, King Oswald, heard Aidan was walking everywhere he went. Like any king, Oswald recognized how inefficient that must be. Surely Aidan could be more effective with a horse. Plus, he wanted to honor Aidan for coming.

So, he called Aidan to his castle and gave him one of his finest royal horses, with all the royal trappings. Aidan thanked the king for his generosity and left.

But at the very first beggar he met on his way out of town,

Aidan unsaddled, walked up to the man, and said, "**I don't have any money, but you can have my horse.**"

The King later heard about this and was beside himself. I mean, this was not just any horse. It was a royal horse. Next time he saw Aidan he asked him what in the world he was thinking! "Have I not many other horses of less value, and of other kinds, which would have been good enough to give to the poor... without giving away the one I had especially set aside for you?"

Aidan saw things differently. He asked a very different question. "King, is [that horse,] that foal of a mare dearer to you... than that son of God begging along the road?".¹

You see, Aidan believed that the holy presence of God was there... even in the flesh of a beggar. That man along the side of the road was no less holy and sacred than any "Son of God."

This is how Aidan lived his life. Not just **feeling bad** for those in need,
but encountering people where they were, flesh to flesh, body to body...

Whether it was a slave or a beggar, or the warrior or brutish people,
Aidan treated them with the dignity of a child of God.
And in the process, probably without even realizing it,
Aidan was touching the very body of Christ.

Whatever you have done to the least of these, Jesus says,
to those that are the hardest to love,
to those that are the most forgotten,
to those that seem so other to you,
so hard to understand,
so removed from your way of life,
whatever you have **done**, good or bad,
to the last, the least, the left over...
you have done to me.

This is what Jesus said to both the sheep and the goats, to both Corman and to Aidan. Neither one, sheep nor goats, realized it at the time. They didn't have it all worked out ahead of time. The only difference was that the sheep were acting on the needs they encountered,
while the goats... well...they saw the need as they were trotting away on their horse, on to the next thing.

¹ Benedicta Ward and Rowan Williams, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: An Introduction and Selection* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012), 94.

It's a common pattern for us. We feel deeply about a need and want to help for a moment, but once the headline changes, we are up on our horse trotting off to the next need without taking the time to get dirty and meet people where they are, flesh to flesh.

And in the process, we are missing Christ.

Encountering Christ in the flesh doesn't just happen simply by compulsively reading about another tragedy on Facebook or cable news and feeling sorry for those people,
or having another emotional response,
or renewed anger at another injustice week after week.

In fact, Suzanne Stabile calls that "episodic meaning," episode after episode you get worked up, hooked on the latest headline,
angered or saddened by this,
then by that...
pulled here
and there...

without ever being rooted long enough to do anything lasting about any of it. When we are caught in episodic meaning, we feel like we care about all these things, but we're never present to one thing or one place long enough... to walk up and touch them, and they you, flesh to flesh, body to body.

But it's in that very physical way we might discover we are touching the very body and blood of Christ.

Jessi and I had the opportunity to go to India while I was in seminary. We traveled all over with a group from Truett for about a month. And the hardest few days... were the days we spent in Calcutta, working with the Sisters of Mercy that are still there carrying on Mother Teresa's work.

And I have to be honest, I didn't like being in Calcutta. It was my least favorite part of the trip. Calcutta is hot, and steamy, and dirty, and I was exhausted, and I just wanted it to be over. Mother Teresa, God bless her, she can have Calcutta. I'll take West County! I don't know how she did it.

You see, Mother Teresa heard God's call to the least of these on the streets of Calcutta India, and that is where she gave her life. That one place, that one calling... to the sick and suffering on the streets of Calcutta.

Day after day, in the stench of death,
in the horror of children used for profit,
in the dirt of the homeless on the streets, she was committed to serving the broken and bleeding body of Christ.

Over time she developed several different houses that focused on different groups of people who were the most in need.

While we were there, Jessi and I were assigned to the house called Dyadon, a home for extremely handicapped children. And these children were all ages... and many of them die there.

On this particular day, I was taking care of a young boy who was completely unresponsive. He had a blank face and was unable to move any part of his body.

So, it was my job to pick him up out of this crib, carry him to the lunch table, strap him in, and spoon feed him this egg-mush-gruel, as best as I could. I remember the food almost falling out of his mouth. He could barely acknowledge the presence of food, let alone me.

After feeding him lunch, I picked him up and put him in his bed, in this little crib where he laid all day. And then, I just sat there for a few minutes... there by the bed, looking into his eyes... sort of overwhelmed by it all.

And I wondered if he could somehow see God's love for him, in my eyes and actions. I wondered if he could see Christ in me, because I had come to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus...

But then I remembered this parable, the very parable that had inspired Mother Teresa to keep going all those years.

"Whatever you did unto the least of these... ..you did unto Me."

And suddenly I realized that between the two of us,
his eyes were the suffering eyes of Christ looking back at me.
When I looked at him, I was looking at the face of God...

This is the last parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew before the events of the crucifixion begin to unfold.

Jesus has just said that in the stranger, the prisoner, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and the naked, you will discover that it was him all along.

The very next chapter and verse begins the crucifixion sequence in which Jesus actually becomes the prisoner,

in which Jesus is stripped of his clothes and becomes naked,
in which Jesus hungers and thirsts as his body dies naked on a cross.

In his very last parable, Jesus is inviting us to see that the suffering of the least of these, is the very suffering of his body and blood on the cross.

In the suffering of the world, is the suffering of God.
And if we will learn to get off our horse, and walk up to that suffering, rather than trotting away,
if we will be present, rather than turning away,
if we will be willing to meet that suffering in front of us,
body to body, flesh to flesh,
then we will discover that we have touched the very life of God.

Truth be told, I don't do that well, and I don't know how all that fits in with the demands of family, and job, and school, and bills to pay.

All I know is that if we want to encounter Jesus in the flesh, then we have to begin with the least of the least.

Amen.

Prayer:

O God, we confess that this is so hard for us to do.

You know already that each one of us are some strange mixture of sheep and goats.

*For all the times we rush off to the next thing,
we ask your forgiveness.*

Our hearts desire is to be your sheep. Loving in ways that matter.

Help us to have the courage to touch the suffering of the world, flesh to flesh.

Silent Reflection:

To those who say they admire my courage, I have to tell them that I would not have any if I were not convinced that each time I touch the body of a leper, a body that reeks with foul stench, I touch Christ's body, the same Christ I receive in the Eucharist.

~Mother Teresa

Dayspring, in **our** deep care for the life of the world,

in our sincere desire to help all of the least of these we hear about,

I think we, as a church, keep trotting away on our horse, always off to the next thing that comes up. The impulse to love and meet every need that comes our way, is a holy one. But when we get caught in episodic meaning, we forget to get off our horse, and walk in one place long enough to meet the least of these... in the flesh.

If you read my newsletter article this month, then you know that I have three particular desires for us as a congregation. There are three things I long to see us give our energy to. One of them is to develop a clear **missional focus**.

Rather than trying to do a little of this and a little of that, always chasing the next thing, I long to see us find the one thing, the one place we are called to walk. Because I'm convinced that if we focused all our efforts and recourses, we could make a real and lasting change for some of the least of these... And in the process, we will encounter Christ.

Now, finding a missional focus for us as a church, as a community, doesn't mean that each of us won't have different things that we are called to do and participate in as individuals. If you're passionate about a cause or a need, then by all means, we, your church family want to bless your calling into that work that God has for you there. In fact, we need to bless and send you into that work just as Aidan was sent by his community to North Umbria.

But as a church, as a community, I think it's time for us to settle in and focus our time and resources... As a church, it's time to stop trotting around on the horse, and be present in one particular way.

You see, I think there is a deep desire stirring in us to make a real and lasting impact on the world. But to do that means we have to focus our energy. It means we can't be everywhere and do everything. It may just mean we'll have to stop doing things we've done... which is hard, isn't it?

It's hard to say no to projects that any one of us are passionate about. But if we gathered all our passion together, and focused it in one place, or one area, not only will we make a lasting change, I believe that we will encounter the very flesh and blood of Christ.