

Matthew 25:31-46
Just Mercy
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We, all of us, have been shown mercy. And the reason God did that was so that we would be people who show mercy.

If I were to sum up the entire message in a word that would be it. Or if I was Lee Ann George giving this sermon that would be it and we would all go home and do this—which would be good for us. But I'm me and you pay me by the word, so, no such luck.

Here in the text Jesus is describing something very specific, and in order to paint this picture to his audience in a vivid way he used a familiar image that would have been something they might have seen that very day—common animals, sheep and goats. In the environment where Jesus told this story there would have been shepherds with their flocks on every hillside. And at the end of every day in order to preserve the wellbeing of each animal, the shepherd had to keep the sheep and goats in separate pens—people knew that this is what would happen.

And in his teaching Jesus is using this figure to present a vivid picture about the future that is coming. He said, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, those first hearers would have known what he was talking about, but what he is alluding to is the end of days. When Jesus the Christ, after he was crucified and raised again, when he ascended to Heaven, after some time would return, not as the humble carpenter, but as the King of Glory. Jesus was describing this event to his hearers, one day he would leave them, but then later would return and then he would stand in the presence of all nations.

Verse 32 uses an interesting Greek phrase *panta ta ethne* (all the nations), which means all people who have ever lived or who would ever live. Jesus uses this picture, which we are tempted to think is a metaphor because he's using animals to describe, but which is not, but a clear description of what will actually happen one day in order for people to be separated. Sheep on one side (one type of person), and the goat on the other (another type of person). Jesus' plain teaching. And the purpose for this plain teaching is to determine where they will spend their eternal future.

Even as I say this I feel the anxiety rising within me. I'm glad however that this time in worship is not a time when I get up and tell you my opinions, I'm glad that it's a time when I'm supposed to get up and tell what Jesus said. And what Jesus said when he thinks about the future is that it is a great broad road on which all of us are traveling and in his vision of the future on that road there is a great fork and the direction that any of us takes is up to us. This is a moment where our human decision is ours, and we can choose the way we'll go, but Jesus says in this story that there will come an end to the road, where the time for human decision is over and it's time for God's decision to be made. And Jesus says some will go to the right and some will go to the left. And the ones who go to the right will go to an eternal blessedness of God's Kingdom, and those who go to the left will go to eternal fire.

Are you comfortable with this? I didn't grow up in a church where this was discussed. My sensibilities cause me to wonder why the people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary

(schedule of yearly Bible readings from which we preachers preach) would put this challenging word of Jesus in.

I was anxious to stand before that group of students and volunteers and speak of a day when God will judge. And I was anxious because I didn't think it was a comfortable thought that God would actually do that. But do you know that it didn't make a single person in that room uncomfortable, in fact it was quite the opposite. They, students, were quite comforted with the thought that God would judge injustice in the world. They were quite alright with the idea that God would send someone away from himself because they had used power in the wrong way, or they had taken advantage of someone who was weak or vulnerable. These students, in their own way, said how could God love something truly if he wasn't willing to judge something that would hurt another person.

Have you ever thought of that? Think of that person in your life who you love deeply, who is the object of your concern, who you give your care and concern. Anything that harms that person, don't you hate that.

I had come from my very privileged upbringing growing up in another community, now I was sitting with people who had come from a very different environment, and for them it was actually a very comforting thought that God would judge injustice. When you suffer everyday around violence and drugs, and oppression, and cruelty that has roots systemically in a society that will never let you rise from beyond that. And the thing that captured the attention of the students I was with that evening was the reason God had for sending some to the right and some to the left.

It was when I came to this point when I could tell that their minds were opened and filled with curiosity. Jesus says these words, the reason some are sent this way and the others that way are not what we would immediately expect. He does not say, you sheep go into heaven because everyday you were at church. You believed the right things. You chose the right denomination to be a part of. You had the right kind of friends. You did the moral things and not the immoral things that others were doing. That's not the reason why Jesus sent some to blessedness and others to torment. The criteria Jesus used and it was quite surprising to his hearers when Jesus spoke it, and it was quite surprising to that room when we discussed it so many years ago.

Listen to what the King of Glory says after, this is verse 35: **For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'**

Do you see how simple this is? Not, you preformed mighty miracles, or you were behind acts of faith that everybody talked about, not that you healed or brought someone back from the dead, or went to prison and released someone from prison. 6 things that these folks did that are so simple that every single person in this room could easily do, even today. Gave liquid to him when he was thirsty, gave food to him when he was hungry, welcomed him when he was a stranger, gave clothing to him when he needed clothing, helped him when he was sick, and visited him when he was in prison. 6 actions that can only be described as mercy.

But Jonathan, isn't this just the end of one portion of scripture? And isn't it dangerous to build your interpretation of Scripture around one single and isolated passage. It has to be bigger than that.

Could it be true that God has such concern for such insignificant things like this? How is it that God could be so moved as to give his eternal kingdom to someone who did such little things. Is it only Jesus who said that this is what really matters? And the answer is absolutely not. It's easy for us to ignore what the whole of scripture actually teaches.

Throughout the Old Testament one of the themes that is most prominent is God's concern and care for the poor and needy in the world. If you want to see this clearly open any one of the books the Prophets wrote if you read through them and take time to read books like Amos, Ezekiel, Jeremiah if you look at any of those writers you will see them describe a God who is infinitely concerned about what is the least significant in our world. In Isaiah 58:6-8 do you know the sacrifice I want do you know the fast I want is for you to pay attention to the poor in your land and take care of them and take them into your house.

Then when you get to the New Testament and we meet that crazy guy John the Baptist. You remember him, as people were coming down to be baptized he said to them with that crazy look in his eye: Bear fruits worthy of repentance. What does that mean? Sounds pretty religious. The crowds asked: what does that mean? In reply to them John says: **Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.**

Do you hear how terribly plain that is? James the author at the end of the New Testament describes pure and undefiled religion as care for the widow and the orphan in their distress. That means that to foster a child or to adopt an orphan is pure undefiled religion before God. To find a widow who is alone and go spend time with her is pure and undefiled religion.

Now you might be thinking to yourself it can't be so simple, it can't just be about caring for poor people. He's quoting some Old Testament prophets, and the NT book of James which a reputable person named Martin Luther called the epistle of straw. He's building a straw argument. But listen, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus has five blocks of teaching. Five sections in which he teaches about the Kingdom of God, and do you know how many of those blocks end with Jesus saying something about care for the poor and overlooked? ALL FIVE.

This passage from Matthew 25 is in the 6th block, and the fifth block Matthew 24 is all about how one day Jesus is going to come back and everybody should be ready. Then there are three parables in which Jesus is separating people in this direction or that, and then the last thing that Jesus teaches in his earthly ministry is this passage from chapter 25. If you don't think this is important to Jesus Christ the King of Glory, you're wrong.

When I read this in that room that night you could have heard a pin drop.

When Jesus said these things to his hearers he didn't say: there were poor people around your who you gave no food or water to. He said I was hungry and you gave me some food, I was thirsty and you gave me water, I was a stranger and you welcomed me and sick and visited me. When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or sick and helped you?

Apparently there will be surprises at the final judgment. The people will say when was it that we did these things unto you?

And the King will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it for one of the least of these you did it to me.”

With his last lesson in his public ministry Jesus said that the way we treat the needy and the poor is the way we treat Jesus. He said clearly and without equivocation, that when you kneel down and give to those who need you are giving to himself, when you stoop down to give some water to someone who is thirsty you are giving it to the King of the Universe.

Jesus so identifies with the poor and needy that he says that he is in them, and I think he says this because he has such love for all.

In that room that night we talked for a long time about how mind blowing it is that Jesus cared so much for poor people. And about how strange it is that Jesus would be so identified with needy folks that all around them in this neighborhood in Minneapolis where we were Jesus was slouched upon and sleeping in every corner of their world.

And they were quite taken by the idea that God would care so deeply for such people, especially considering all of the things church people get so tied up about.

Does this story teach salvation by works?

You are saved by grace

You are not saved by good works, but by grace for good works. And if you leave off that last bit then you are

What should we do? Mercy

We will receive mercy when we give mercy. Show mercy to others.

Then next day we had some free time so we went to basketball courts. We went to these particular courts because I knew that right around the corner was my favorite Mexican Restaurant. A little place called Taco Bell.

After basketball as we walked up Portland Ave and around the corner to the restaurant there was a man sitting on the curb. And as we walked past Ellis reached his hand up onto my shoulder and said, “Hey Mister C, there go Jesus.”

We went inside to order, I my 5 items (which was my standard at that time in my life) Ellis with his 1 taco and Dan his 2—we weren’t supposed to buy food for the kids because it was seen as a sign of disrespect. But as we left the restaurant I went to say something to Ellis, and turning to look, he wasn’t there, he was back kneeling down and giving his taco to the man.

Jesus died for all, so that those who live, truly live, might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for him. And that is as simple as giving your one taco to someone who has none.

Mercy, just mercy.