

“I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Matthew 25:31-46
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on November 26, 2017

There is no missing Jesus’ point. The “punch line” of the parable, if you will, is plain as day: “Whatever you did to the least of these, you did for me.”

Unlike some of Jesus’ other sayings, the meaning of this one is pretty clear: Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Visit the prisoner.

Imagine a Christianity in which *these* are the sayings we display on our bumper stickers and our billboards and our Facebook posts. What a different world it might be.

For those of us who have been damaged or beaten down by religion or by legalism, a parable like this is a breath of fresh air, a reminder that what God requires of us is to do justice and love mercy, a confirmation that what matters most is how we treat people. At the end of the day God is not going to judge us by how well we can recite the catechism or even how fervently or eloquently we’ve defended the faith. God is going to ask whom we’ve taken care of and whom we have ignored.

I do not think this parable is telling us that *what* we believe doesn’t matter. In fact, I think what we believe about God is central to this parable’s message. I want to suggest this parable is important to our formation, not only because it tells us how to treat our neighbor but because of what it suggests we *believe*. I want to look at the *theology* of this text. What does it teach us about God? Not just what does it teach us about how to behave, but what does it say about who God is?

In order to examine this story’s theology, let’s back up to the opening line: “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 around him . . .”

The story is set up in such a way that we expect to learn a thing or two about God’s glory, God’s kingship, God’s reign over the nations. But what happens next is unexpected. We learn that God’s glory is revealed not residing on a throne, but manifested in acts of charity, not among kings, but among paupers. Interestingly the people recognize the King *now* seated on his throne, but before, *when it counted*, they did not even know God was in their midst.

We learn that God often moves through this world incognito, unrecognizable to anyone who expects a crown. God is less interested in power and prestige and praise and far more interested in hanging out with those who are troubled and alone. Sounds a bit like the man we call Jesus, does it not?

One of the ways we evaluate our theology—our understanding of God—is to discern whether the God we’ve discovered in the text matches up with the God we find in Christ. Does the God in the parable align with the God we find in Christ? Why yes! In the parable we find a God who takes up residence with the people of this world, enters their suffering and shares their physical and emotional needs, a God who is *right there* among the neediest, the least of these, a God whose incarnational presence is of utmost importance. According to the parable, if you don’t know the incarnational presence of God, it turns out that you don’t know God at all.

This brings us to God’s wrath in the parable. Wrath. Our favorite subject. To continue our theological quest, let’s take a serious look at what God’s wrath in this story has to say about who God is. It is worth noting that *in the parable God’s judgment and wrath are reserved for those who did not join in solidarity with the oppressed*. God’s judgment and wrath are reserved for those who did not join in solidarity with the oppressed.

To understand God’s judgment in this way challenges the very meaning of Christian salvation. According to the parable, at the end of time it turns out that God is most concerned with how you lived in the here and now *as it relates to your suffering neighbor*. The end of the age is not an escape from this world’s sorrows and tribulations; *it is a clearer look at them*. The end of time is not first an *end* to suffering but an *exposure* to it—a fierce, unblinking look at those who were sick and imprisoned and hungry and naked. The end of the age is not an escape but a reckoning, not a sweet by and by but a startling revelation that shocks both the sheep and the goats. Neither group fully understood the present time! The concern of the parable is not eternity; it is focused on unveiling the *now* to which we have been blind.

This suggests that salvation is not a ticket into heaven for you as individual. What it means to “be saved” is to become a participant in God’s care for and redemption of the world. To be saved is to be set free from the bondage of pre-occupation with self and liberated into the love of neighbor. God is less concerned with saving you from some fiery future ordeal and more concerned with waking you up to the here and now, helping you see God’s presence in the face of the hungry person beside you. God is concerned with saving everyone from hell on earth and if you’ve missed that, you’ve missed knowing and understanding God’s very nature. God wants you and I to be in on the mission too, for that is what it means to participate in the kingdom.

The kingdom is not up ahead. It’s right here, right now, in the relationships we have with our neighbors. Christ’s presence is not far away in heaven but right here in our midst in the faces of those who suffer. The “King” is not best understood as glory or a throne but as a God who resides among the poor.

This theology of God and God’s kingdom is important.

I could spend the rest of this sermon getting you worried about whether you are a sheep or a goat, whether you’ve recognized Christ among the poor or whether you’ve missed it. I could spend this sermon trying to get you to change your behavior and be better at noticing and serving the oppressed. And maybe that would be a worthwhile use of a sermon. I could use the rest of this sermon to talk about our upcoming Christmas-time charity, and we could think together

about whether giving away our money to good causes is the same thing as being with the poor and the oppressed and knowing them by name.

But today, I want to say this to you instead: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Today I want to focus not on whether we are doing enough but on who we understand God to be. I want us to remember that right now, in this very moment, we are being saved, and God has not forgotten us. Right now, in this moment, Christ is in our midst, and we are learning how to love him as we learn to love our neighbor. Right now, in this moment, we are experiencing God’s kingdom. Right now, in this moment, God is with us. If you suffer, God is *especially* with you, and when you move towards others who are suffering, God is extra, extra close.

By being who you are, by offering yourself in relationship to others, by caring for the poor and the outcast and the prisoner, you, my friends, are finding God. You are citizens of a different kingdom, and it shows. By loving one another, you have loved God. By experiencing grief, you have brushed shoulders with the divine. By letting your heart break open in empathy for others, you have opened your heart to God. By knowing God’s children by name, you have welcomed eternity itself into your soul.

Hear these words of blessing from Jan Richardson:

You
who are
yourselves
a blessing

who know
that to feed
the hungering
is to bless

and to give drink
to those who thirst
is to bless

who know
the blessing
in welcoming
the stranger

and giving clothes
to those
who have none

who know
to care

for the sick
is blessing

and blessing
to visit
the prisoner:

may the blessing
you have offered
now turn itself
toward you

to welcome
and to embrace you
at the feast
of the blessed.

Amen.