

<Ezekiel 34:11-24; Psalm 100:1-5; Matthew 25:31-46>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Righteous King, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Holding the door for someone: 50 points. Smiling to a stranger on the street: 2 points.

A number of years ago a comedic show came out that had a simple, straightforward initial concept: When a person died, they went to either The Good Place, or to The Bad Place, and where you ended up was determined by whether or not you had earned enough positive points in your life. And every conceivable action had a set point value.

Serving meals at a shelter on Thanksgiving: 300 points. Adopting an abandoned pet: 101 points.

The premise, then, was that anyone, with enough positive points in life, could achieve entry into The Good Place. But just as there were actions in life that gave you positive points, there were others that would earn you negative points.

Cursing at someone in traffic: -30 points. Not saying "bless you" to someone who sneezed: -2 points.

All these actions, with their set point values, would be tallied at the time of a person's death, and if they had reached the minimum threshold for "The Good Place," then that's where they ended up.

It's a fun premise, and it's a fun show; they did real research on different ethical and philosophical thinkers so the arguments presented are actually informed and accurate. But what do you think would be the point value of the actions Jesus describes in this well-known parable on the separation of the sheep and goats? And what would be the negative point value of not doing these things?

As I mentioned last week, we've been spending these last few weeks in some challenging parables on the quality and character of the disciples' lives of faith and apostleship. The first week we heard Jesus' exhortation to remain prepared and ready, committed in our faith to live up to the calling we have received. Last week, in tandem with this exhortation, was the reminder to live into the fullness of the gifts we have received, and to trust in the One who has placed trust in us. This week, though, in the capstone parable of Jesus' discourse ahead of his arrest, the scene changes to the future return of the Messiah and the judging of the nations.

And I confess, I struggle with this parable. Not in terms of what is expected, or by what criteria will be used in this time of judgment, but rather I struggle because I get caught in the trap of trying to determine whether or not I have met enough of the requirements to be deemed a sheep, and welcomed, as opposed to being a goat, and cast out into the darkness.

Perhaps you can relate to getting caught in a similar line of thinking. Perhaps, like me, you also have wondered at some point or another in hearing this parable where you might end up when it comes to this time of judgement. But for all our discussion in this triad of parables, there is one question we have not fully addressed: Where is God in all of this?

I do not know that we should be too hard on ourselves for not giving attention to this question. For all of the exhortation and encouragement of these parables, there is also an uncomfortable side. Have you noticed that, in each of these three parables, they end with the uncommitted, the unfaithful, the goats being cast out into the deep darkness of weeping and gnashing of teeth? This is an uncomfortable thought! Especially as we stand on the edge of a holiday season of peace and celebration. And most especially as it potentially creates an image of God we'd rather not recognize.

Sometimes such readings, ending on such a note, make it difficult to proclaim, "these are the words of the Lord; thanks be to God." Really? Thanks be to God for such a harsh reality-check? Really?

But to think in such terms is, well, human thinking. These parables end with the ones on the outside receiving nothing but condemnation and being cast further into the darkness, and we can't help but imagine that might be us. That might be me. That is how I think in human terms. And certainly, for a people of Israel, a people of God who had lived generations with cruel kings and pharaohs, the idea of such a leader would not have seemed too far fetched.

But there are three things to bear in mind: 1) These are parables, and as we discussed last week they are meant to be comically fictionalized stories used to illustrate a general truth; they are not one-to-one allegories. 2) God is a God of mercy, of equipping, of lifting-up - especially the marginalized and down-trodden - and these parables are intended to help disciples understand a fuller nature of such a Kingdom, such a rule of God. Our Lord is One whose voice the sheep recognize, and who will ultimately lead the people with grace, compassion, and love. And 3) natural actions have natural consequences; this is true even in parables. And the consequence of not doing for the least of these is that we ultimately look past their humanity, seeing them only as an "other" to be ignored or passed by. And when we do that, when we dismiss or ignore the humanity of others, we indeed find ourselves in darkness. Deep darkness, at that.

Almost the way, say, we might view the players from an opposing team (especially a certain retired quarterback from a certain Massachusetts-based team). We often cannot, or will not, see them as human. To see them as an enemy, as opposition, as "other" makes it easier to dislike them, to hate them, to hurt them. To dehumanize them means we can hold them beyond arm's distance. Hold them in our own darkness.

But they are no less our family. For some of us that biologically true, but in the Kingdom of God that's true first and foremost. They are human. They are family. They are worthy. In Christ, come to earth as the Divine Incarnate, we are all made family; the humanity of Christ connects us all. And with Christ as our King we are shepherded into the fullness of humanity, of family, and of connection to each other. Our Lord speaks, and we recognize his voice. From this, Christ leads us into connection and communion, into faith and into family.

This is a parable about recognizing humanity in each other. And on this Christ the King Sunday, it is also a reminder and a reassurance that the humanity of all is lifted up and made possible through the humanity of Christ, who has come into the world to bring light and stave off the darkness. We can get so hung up on whether we have done enough, acted enough, said enough, believed enough, that it becomes all too easy to focus, well, on me. On ourselves. And we lose focus of where God is located in all of this. And God, located in the person of Christ, is found in the breach between us and the darkness. God is located in those who are next to us. God is found in the person of everyone we come across.

We can't reduce any of this down to a balance sheet. To do so is to lose the ability to see each other as human, and find ourselves in deep darkness. We end up making a false determination on an utterly subjective value.

But in the Kingdom of God, and when Christ comes again, the determining factor will be, simply, did we see and treat each other as humans? And there's only one answer to that.

Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned...seeing, recognizing, and lifting the inherent humanity in one another: priceless. Points beyond counting. The living of the life of faith. In this is the Kingdom of God. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*