

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Peter Strommen

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Matthew 25.31-46

31 '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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And 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." ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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." ⁴⁴Then 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?" ⁴⁵Then 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." ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

SERMON

Of all the teachings of Jesus, Matthew 25 is among the most vivid and compelling. The setting is the final judgment of humankind. The judge is the Son of Man, Jesus. Jesus uses a familiar scene which one can still observe in Palestine today. Sheep and goats often graze together during the day but are separated for the night, yet there is nothing familiar about what happens next. Those on his right hand are welcomed into the kingdom because they ministered to Jesus when

he was vulnerable. "When was this?" they ask, puzzled because they don't recall seeing Jesus at all. "When you did it to the least of these" replies Jesus, "you did it unto me."

Those on the left hear the reverse. They too ask: "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?" Replies Jesus: "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."

This powerful picture has motivated Christians in powerful ways. Again this morning, let's ask what God might be saying to us through these words. Let's begin with something so obvious it's easy to miss. Jesus has the last word on human history. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what Wall Street or Washington says. Politicians don't get to spin things and powerful interests don't have a special number to call. The world stands in judgment before its Maker. In addition, it's an awesome thought to behold. It puts everything else into perspective.

One of my mentors from Luther Seminary was Professor Paul Sonnack. Paul's dad was a pastor, living in the cities with his wife. Well into their old age, Paul's mom died and he accompanied his father to select a burial plot. Now you need to understand something about Minneapolis to understand this story. Years ago, the Minneapolis skyline had one tall building, the Foshay Tower. Even though it is only 39 stories high, it was the tallest building west of the Mississippi for several years. And so, people in Minneapolis were somewhat proud of it, shaped as it was like the Empire State Building.

Well, as they walked through the cemetery, which was near downtown, the salesperson said to Pastor Sonnack: "Come over here. I want to show you a special plot over the rise of this hill. Of course, it's more expensive, but look, it has a view of the Foshay Tower." I can still hear Professor Sonnack voice: "And I've got to give credit to dear old dad in his grief....he turned to the salesman and said: "Ah yes, the trumpet will sound and Christ will come again in the clouds. Mama will rise from her grave and say: "Oh look, the Foshay Tower!" Jesus wants us to come to grips with what is most important, most valuable in life. This is a scene before eternity and the temporal has passed away.

Another thing to notice: Kindness to the least of these defined Jesus' public ministry. Remember him feeding the five-thousand, touching and healing the leper, welcoming social outcasts and sinners, offering living water to the woman at the well and including the stranger. His actions are about more than being a nice guy! They are signs of what is happening. The kingdom of God is here, it's about restoring and redeeming the world, and remember how Jesus dies, between two criminals. His whole ministry is among the "least of these." In fact, in a certain respect, aren't we all, in the final analysis, the least of these before God, beggars in search of salvation?

This helps us to understand the significance of those who neither recognize Jesus nor minister to the least of these. Their blindness reveals hearts closed to God. In spirit, they never knew Jesus and they really don't care about what Jesus brings. So let's not miss what's happening here. Jesus draws so close to humankind that there is no room for saying: "I love God but not what God loves."

Now let's apply this to our lives. My first thought is simple and direct. The second requires more reflection. We all know the Nike commercial - - "just do it" now morphed into "do it." People get that. They associate doing fun exercise and adventure with a shoe. Just do it. One way of looking at Matthew 25 is about that simple: just do it. And when we do, something happens to us. We begin to see and understand what we did not recognize before. Some of faith is taught by doing!

A couple days ago, I listened to a Bethel member who has spent months working with others to improve the effectiveness of church help with disaster victims. Some of the first people I met at Bethel started the Food Pantry and were transitioning into a larger structure to handle the demand. There are those from our congregation who visit a prison and lead bible studies there. These are just a few examples.

Congregations and individuals that "do" Matthew 25 often find themselves strengthened in faith and energy, even if it makes difficult demands upon them. How often I've heard this from those who reach out, indeed, I did my first day here from a woman who works in our homeless ministry: "I get so much out of this. Honestly, I feel like I receive far more than I am able to give." Some congregations have tried evaluating their ministry through the lens of Matthew 25. There is a certain fellowship with Jesus that can be felt when your congregation and your household set aside time, resources and money to reach out to those experiencing great need.

Now that's simple to understand. Matthew 25, "just do it." But let me conclude with something that requires more reflection. Matthew 25 is not the only teaching about how we will be judged. If it were, we would think going to heaven is about how well we do in reaching out to the least of these. But that's tricky. How many of you have ever reached out to one of the least of these? I would guess all of you have. Are we all sheep then? Have any of you also failed to see such a person in need, or in seeing them, failed to do something? We've all failed sometimes, haven't we? Does that make us well-intentioned goats then, or bad sheep?

Anytime we make salvation based on what we did and didn't do, we get anxious, self-preoccupied, proud or despairing and prone to keeping count. Paul rightly saw the futility of this. So did Luther. Elsewhere Jesus teaches about faith that saves, and always it comes down to God's abundant grace - - as the sinner on the cross next to Jesus found out. I'm suggesting we need to hear Matthew 25 along with other important passages.

So, are we saved by grace, freely given? Yes. There can be no other way. To know Jesus, to truly know Him is to be grasped by his profound love for us. And this includes when we are blind and lost. In fact, what is so astonishing about the gospel is that the Judge of the universe is the very One who took upon himself the unjust judgment of unrighteous men and died between the least of these. We need to keep this in mind always when we ponder Matthew 25.

So what does this mean, this vision of the great judgment? Christians have not all agreed on how to best interpret it. But it certainly means this. At the end of the day, we are accountable to God. And the one who judges us is Jesus. Jesus cuts right through the smoke and mirrors and pretensions of life. He zeroes in on the heart and its loves. Now God doesn't tally up a grand total of "frequent love points" to win a trip to heaven. But the Bible has often observed that when our hearts are open to God's saving grace, our hearts also begin to open up to those Christ loves.

So, next time you see genuine love shown to someone in need, know that you may be witnessing a sign of Jesus' presence. Those involved may not understand it this way. But we believe, don't we, that Jesus is already present in the world? Yes, there is mystery here. But it's the kind of mystery in which we may take comfort and inspiration.

Amen. © 2011