

“Some Stories We Have To Be Able To Preach”

Matthew 25:31–46

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Mike Queen told a story at Randall Lolley’s memorial service about a time when he struggled to find the motivation or passion needed for ministry. It is a struggle we all encounter somewhere along the way. Part of Mike’s struggle involved finding something new to say on Easter. And again, it is a struggle with which many can identify. The stories of Christmas and Easter come around every year. But when Mike talked to Randall about this, expecting some sympathetic word, Randall said, “Mike, any preacher who can’t get excited about the story of resurrection might not ought to be preaching.” So much for sympathy!

But Randall’s word makes sense and it was a word Mike needed to hear. The most familiar stories present a challenge in terms of finding something new to say, but newness isn’t the sole criterion for worth. The homiletic goal is to allow the story to speak for itself or to be a channel through which God speaks. Novelty is not the goal.

It’s like something unnecessary some couples do with weddings. It’s fine to include creative elements that express who two people are, but there is no need to go to great lengths to do something no one else has done. Who the two people are is distinctive, and the traditions we share have deep meaning as they are. In like manner, we don’t need to create a whole new meaning for sacred stories that have a power of their own, we simply need to let them speak for themselves, especially the most central stories, but we do need to let them speak.

Easter is one of these central stories, the story of resurrection after crucifixion, hope for eternal life, love’s victory over fear. Christmas is another one, the story of Jesus’ birth, the incarnation. And the parable we have read from Matthew 25 about sheep and goats is another. It is so familiar that surely we have squeezed every possible meaning out of it, and yet, it is the most concise statement of what it means to follow Jesus we can find. We have to be able to preach it.

It is important to begin with an appreciation for the fact that this is not just a nice little example story, a suggestion of things we might consider doing when we feel like it. It is a story about judgment day and what is required for us to come out on the right side of it. The parable begins with the Son of Man coming in glory, with all his angels with him. He sits on his throne, all the nations are gathered before him, and he separates them as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Then, he declares the basis of judgment and he renders judgment.

We might approach this story like a fairy tale, with all the cuddly animals on the scene, but even fairy tales, in their original form, often have a bite, sometimes literally! This story certainly does. It ends with some people being welcomed into the kingdom and others being sent away into eternal punishment. Very much like the other two kingdom parables we have considered in Matthew 25, this story does not end happily ever after for everyone.

The key lies in how we treat other people, especially people in need — the hungry, the stranger, the sick and imprisoned. Jesus goes so far as to say that when we help anyone in need, we are helping him. He identifies with, is present in, the poor and outcast, the sick and marginalized, those with whom he spent much of his ministry. Our calling is to go and do likewise, and according to this parable, how well we fulfill this calling will determine Christ's assessment of our lives.

It is a different image of judgment than what people who often talk about judgment day describe. Usually the emphasis is on what we believe, especially about Jesus, or how we behave in relationship to certain standards of piety, but these criteria are not found on Jesus' lips. What he talks about in the previous two parables is preparedness and doing something with what God entrusts to us, and now he talks about addressing human need in a practical way.

The question we might want to ask is as to how this teaching relates to teachings about being saved by grace alone. With all due apologies to Martin Luther, there are other passages, like in the book of James, that push up against this claim. Faith without works is dead, James says (James 2:17). But there is no essential conflict here. This is not an either/or proposition. We all need grace, but those who

experience grace in Christ want to extend grace to others. Jesus tells a parable about a person who is forgiven a great debt and then refuses to forgive a smaller debt. It doesn't end well for this person.

Those who receive grace naturally extend grace, and grace is not just forgiveness, it is anything someone does not have. A meal for the hungry is grace. Clothing for one who needs it is grace. Hospitality extended to a stranger is grace. A visit to someone who is sick or in prison is grace. Jesus calls us to works of faith but in response to grace and he is saying that our response reveals whether we have understood what he has given us, and thus will serve as the basis for judgment.

The good news is we are given the standard for judgment ahead of time. It's like what a seminary professor of mine did. He gave us a list of essay questions to study in advance and on test day he named two or three of those questions and asked us to write essays. There were no surprises, we knew what the questions would be, it was up to us to prepare appropriately, which on one occasion I did not...

Jesus tells us we prepare for an accounting of our lives by feeding the hungry, sharing water with the thirsty and clothing with all who need it, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and imprisoned. It is not an exhaustive list. The point is that we are called to serve the least in need, as Jesus does. But these specific examples are worth noting.

Some of them are basic needs we can respond to readily. Hungry people need food and we help feed the hungry in many ways — through our food truck, Rise Against Hunger, Urban Ministries, Oak City Cares, A Place at the Table. In addition, we work through ministries that empower people to feed themselves. In like manner, we know what to do when people need clothing. Thousands of people are helped with clothing each year through our clothing ministry, thanks to the endless work of a huge team of volunteers. And we know how important it is to visit the sick, the homebound, and those in grief.

But while addressing some basic needs seems to come naturally and meet little resistance, addressing other needs creates tension. For example, welcoming the stranger has become a hot-button issue. “The stranger” is not just someone we don't know. It is a technical term for

immigrant or refugee, and even Christians in this land are deeply divided about how to respond to these strangers, though the biblical witness is not divided.

Over and over again in the Torah, the Israelites are commanded to welcome the stranger in their land, to leave food in the field for the stranger. As they once lived in the foreign land of Egypt and survived because of the generosity of others, at least until a certain Pharaoh came to power, they were to extend compassion, we might say grace, to the outsider in their land. Now, Jesus updates this calling in his preview of judgment day, saying, “Those who welcome the stranger welcome me.”

There is no dispute in scripture. It is one of the most commonly named concerns, over 100 times! How can Christians be divided? There are practical concerns with security, we know how to address these. There are limits to how many people we can welcome, though we are nowhere near that limit, and most immigrants are not a drain on our economy, they add to it in numerous ways. But even if we disagree on specific national policies vis à vis immigrants, we cannot harbor hostility toward them and square these feelings with the teachings of Jesus.

The good news is we do a great deal to welcome immigrants and refugees in this church through our clothing ministry and in our partnership with Wyatts who will speak here again on a Wednesday night in December. This is a good thing because there is more global migration now than ever before, most recently from Afghanistan and Ukraine. It is a good thing because Jesus calls us to do this in no uncertain terms, as a condition of final judgment. And it is a good thing because most of us are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Only a few of us who have Indigenous American blood are natives.

Visiting those in prison also creates a challenge for us. We assume they are guilty and getting what they deserve. Most are but some are not. As good as our system of justice is, it is not perfect. Darryl Hunt served nineteen years for a rape and murder in Winston-Salem he did not commit. DNA evidence and the confession of the man who committed these crimes finally led to the release of this kind and gentle soul.

Not everyone inside is guilty, and if your skin is dark, you are more likely to be convicted and serve more time. But even those who

are guilty are children of God, sons and daughters, parents and siblings, and in many cases, people raised in poverty or people who made a mistake. Moses murdered a man in anger and then fled Egypt. God did not give up on him because he committed a crime, a violent crime.

We need not be naïve about or permissive of criminal behavior. Many years ago I did an internship in state parole in Kentucky. It was an educational experience. But nor can we dismiss as no longer of value anyone who is or has been incarcerated, not if we want to square our thinking with the teachings of Jesus. Addressing some needs creates greater challenges, but doing so is still part of our calling.

But we should have known all of this already. Long before Jesus told this parable about judgment day, there were signs that pointed to what mattered most to him. From the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth when he claimed Isaiah's vision of one anointed to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives to his ministry with the poor and outcast, from his mother's vision of his life turning the world upside down to his healing of the sick and disabled, it was clear that Jesus would spend his life among the wounded, seeking to heal them, whether his actions were accepted by the protectors of propriety or not. This is how he lived, he called us to follow him, his view of judgment day is no surprise. There were signs all along the way.

But there are signs in our lives as well, ways we can tell that this is what matters most. When do we feel God's affirmation? When do we sense the Spirit blessing us? Perhaps in a time of fellowship, at the Fall Festival or a Shrove Tuesday event... Perhaps in the context of worship when children and youth lead some part of the service, when glorious music lifts our spirits... But do we not feel the Spirit's affirmation most when we help people in need through the clothing ministry or Toy Joy, building a Habitat house or working with the Wyatts or the Andersons, simply listening to a friend who has known loss?

These experiences tell us what matters most. We don't have the wait until judgment day. We know already. It's about what we do for the least of these in need, like the parable of the sheep and goats tells us. Familiar or not, we have to be able to preach this story... and live it.