

Ser20-45 "Liberation Faith" TUC Matt 25:31-46

Let me try to lay out what I am thinking about today (in fact all week): Our faith is not something we put in a box to hold on to or to save or to secure. Our faith is an active process of living lively in the world with Jesus at the center of our life. But sometimes, like last week with the third recipient of that one talent the master gave, we hold on to our faith. I am hoping to inspire us to be liberated from hoarding our faith...liberated to find in our gratitude and gifts what we will share with another person....even the least of these.

It's Thanksgiving week. Time to look at all that's making life good, different and difficult and to find what we're grateful for. Recognizing there is a great deal of inequality in the world, it's time to add up our gifts and gratitude's; to see where we fit in the scheme of things.

Listen to what inequality looks like: "If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep ... you are richer than 75 percent of this world of ours. If you have money in the bank, cash in your wallet and spare change in a dish someplace ... you are among the top 8 percent of the Earth's wealthiest people. The inequality in wealth and in resources is immense. And based on our gospel story of the Sheep and the Goats, there may be some inequality in the way we live out our faith in the world. The gap between the sheep and goats is huge.

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness ... you are more fortunate than the million who will not survive this week. If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of starvation ... you are ahead of 500 million people in the world. If you can attend this worship service, or any other religion-related meeting, without fear of harassment, arrest, torture or death ... you are fortunate. Billions of people in the world cannot."

In Ephesians 1:15-21, Paul "does not cease to give thanks, but not for objects and things. NO, he is grateful for faith in Jesus Christ, for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, for God's power, for spiritual blessings, for the word of truth. Can we wrap any of these up in packages with lovely ribbons? No, we can't. Even so, they are the very best of gifts for our lives. Paul is so grateful to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, a passionate follower who gives his whole life to the gospel. He wants each person to have a full life of faith...a kind of faith liberation that sets us free to live fully.

So, what about us today? What are our gratitude's and what of our lives are we committed to sharing with the world? With the least of these? Let me put it this way? Are we standing with the sheep or with the goats?

This is a hard question in the light of our gospel lesson from Matthew this morning. This image of Jesus in Matthew 25 is different from the merciful, loving, compassionate Christ we like to remember.

This image of Jesus is more like "the huge mosaic in the cathedral of Saint Mark's in Venice." It's an awesome sight to see. I understand as you "enter Saint Mark's from blinding, midday Mediterranean sunlight, the interior is dark - very dark." You can't see a thing, but as your eyes gradually become accustomed to the darkness, looking up and down upon you is this huge image of Christ with hand raised in judgment. To his right? You know as depicted in today's gospel - the sheep. And to his left - the condemned goats.

I would agree with one who says that "this is an image of Jesus that is not usually shown in Christian art. We live in a politically correct nonjudgmental "my conscience is my guide," the truth is only the truth as I see it sort of morality. How does this parable of Jesus hit you this morning? Are you shocked and afflicted by it? If so, that's good, because Jesus seems to have that intention in mind when he tells these stories. We shall be judged on whether we will give our lives to follow Christ. We shall be judged in terms

of what we do with our gratitude. We shall be judged on how faithful we are.

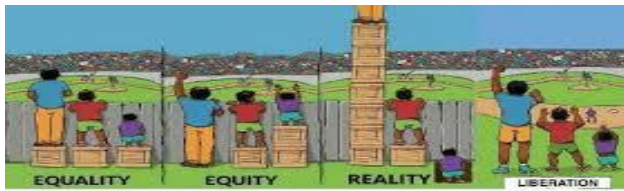
I sometimes struggle with this image of a judgmental Jesus, with the harshness of his judgment. In some ways this parable is divisive. I still to this day struggle with this theme of the second coming of Christ and the final judgement day. How will it happen?

But you know what, I think there is deep inside of us the need for some sort of final accounting for our lives. What is the final truth? Through the ages, men and women have had a deep longing for that final truth about their lives? We want it to matter that we were ever here. Did we amount to anything of great value? Are we sheep or are we goats?

Is it true then that we want "one moment where all the bitter rivalries get settled, where all the lies are exposed as lies, where all the people who suffered unjustly get vindicated?" Is it really true that we "hunger and hope for an ultimate, final, total assessment of life?"

I expect we want that final truth for others. But do we want it for ourselves? At some level, I imagine we do want to know of God whether and how we did all we could with our gifts and with our faith.

I know one thing for sure. I want to be with the sheep, and not only do I want to be the sheep and not the goats, I want to be a lean and good sheep, not the fat and selfish sheep. I want to hear the King say, "I'm telling you the solemn truth - whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me---you did it to me." But you know what I really, really want is to be like the people gathered on Jesus' right hand. Those people are stunned with this blessing. They are shocked and amazed. There's no Hallelujah chorus. No. There is surprise and befuddlement. Silence. They hear the good news that they are going to be with the chosen, but they are worried there is some mistake, because they haven't done any of these things that the Lord says they did.



Liberation

I want to say a word about the fascinating graphic shown at the beginning of worship. This is a visionary image of what the world could look like if there were more equality, more equity between the people of the world...And out of that would come a strong liberation from the reality so many face in the real world.

Let me end with three lines of lyrics from a song by a rock group called Foo Fighters: In times like these:

IN times like these, we learn to live again;
 In times like these, we learn to give and give again;
 In times like these, we learn to love again...

May you be fully faithful, liberated from all that keeps your faith hidden.
 Liberated from the goats and joyful with the sheep. Amen.