

“When Did We See You?”
October 17, 2021
Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

This chapter of Matthew’s gospel is filled with familiar imagery. It begins with the parable of the ten bridesmaids, five of them wise and five of them foolish, then it moves to the story of the three servants with talents, two of them wise and one of them foolish, and finally we have this vision of final judgment when the people of the nations will be separated like sheep from goats. There’s no mention of foolishness or laziness in this one, just a plunge into an eternal fire. So, the stakes are a little different, I guess. Of course, all of these are metaphorical. They have to do with our behavior in the meantime.

But that behavior isn’t unimportant. We’re not called to just twiddle our thumbs while we wait for the end. We have work to do. And the vision Jesus reveals gives us the guidance we need to direct that work. Matthew 25 is a sort of blueprint for us as we think about our identity as a faith community. It invites us to look closely at ourselves and the world around us and ask where do we see the greatest need and how do we respond.

In this vision there are two elements that are especially worth noting, I think. First, I find it interesting that both those who are sent to the right and those who are sent to the left are aware of the needs around them. The difference is one group responds to the need and the other doesn’t. So, it’s not a matter of failing to see people in need. We know they’re there. We see them every day. Many of us go by them on our way to work or when we’re out shopping. We know people are hungry and thirsty and under-dressed, that they need nutrition and proper clothing. We know there are people who are sick or in prison who need human contact that isn’t clinical or punitive. I attended a conference once where Walter Brueggemann was speaking and someone asked him what the role for clergy is in the healthcare system. I think this goes for anyone in the church who’s visiting folks in the hospital: he said our role is to remind the patient they’re human and not a condition for treatment. We’re there to affirm their identity as a whole person. That’s what visiting someone who’s sick or in prison can do.

We know those folks are around us and we’re called to respond. When we do we take a step into God’s kingdom. When we fail to respond we fall back into the banality of an unfulfilled life, we burn with regret.

I read a report this past week that says Buffalo is the third poorest city of its size in the country. Something like 28% of the population in Buffalo lives in poverty, about 46% of children. Part of our commitment as a Matthew 25 church, a congregation committed to the values expressed in this part of Jesus’ teachings, is the eradication of systemic poverty. That’s a tall order and not something we can accomplish on our own. But it gives us a framework to use when we’re thinking about what we do and how we use our resources. What sorts of actions can we take to help alleviate the effects of poverty and what kinds of policies do we advocate for that

can actually reduce poverty and make change in people's lives? That includes, certainly, donating to and working in food pantries or ministries like Friends of Night People, collecting food for Thanksgiving baskets as we will in a few weeks, but it also includes writing councilmembers and congresspeople; pushing for policies that can lead to better housing and education and access to loans for poor and low income people. Those are the things we do to step into God's kingdom.

The other element of this vision I find interesting is neither group, sheep or goats, is aware that the Lord is present in the lives of those in need. They both ask, "When did we see you?" Why is that? Why is it that even those who respond to people in need are oblivious to God's presence in them? And is that a problem? I suppose there's a certain purity in the actions of those who respond even when they don't realize they're serving God. But what's lost when we fail to realize that?

It seems to me, this is the interior work Jesus is calling his followers to be engaged in. Yes, it's important to feed people who are hungry. But it may be even more important to see in every other the image of God. That's at the root of the other pillar that defines a Matthew 25 church: a commitment to dismantle institutional racism. Racism, or what we're really targeting, white supremacy is grounded in the belief that non-white people do not carry the image of God, that people with a darker skin color are inherently inferior. When we fail to recognize Christ in Black people and people of color we give ourselves permission to ignore their needs and treat them unjustly. Once we see Christ in them, the whole system of racism falls apart.

Seeing Christ all around us, seeing the image of God in every other person, is a daily discipline. I'm reminded of that song from Godspell based on the 13th century prayer from Richard of Chichester: "Day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day." Or as we'll sing at the close of our worship: "Christ in the eyes of all who see me, Christ in the ears that hear my voice, Christ in the hearts of all who know me: O Christ, surround me; O Christ, surround me."

"When did we see you?" is the question this vision should raise in our hearts every day. It invites us to look for Christ all around us. It invites us to respond to the needs of the world in ways that honor the One we worship and serve. When we do these things, when we are fully aware of and respond to the needs of people around us and when we truly see the image of God in every person we encounter, we will be living in God's kingdom. It will unfold around us and we'll see the world through new eyes. We'll see the world through eyes of hope and promise; we'll see the world as a place of justice and peace. And we will be transformed; we'll become members of the family of God, no longer strangers but home where we belong.

Amen