

It happens to open-minded Christians when we come up against the harsh judgment from Jesus' final sermon in Matthew. This text brings us up short. We resist the proposition that Jesus intends to judge humanity. We get anxious that we will be judged, saved or damned, for all eternity based on what we do. "He will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left." The sheep will be invited to eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven. The goats will be sent away to suffer eternal fire. All the people who ever lived, including Christian believers and non-believers, people who could have heard the Gospel but didn't, people who were born before the Gospel was proclaimed – all the people of every nation of the world who ever lived will wind up in heaven or in hell. Spreading the Good News, which is what evangelism means, includes talking up the importance of the Final Judgment when Jesus returns. John Calvin himself had to concede that this passage teaches that one's eternal fate is dependent upon how ethically one acts in life. Where's pre-destination when you need it? Yes, we recite the creed: And he will come again to judge the living and the dead. But we are rather embarrassed. It all seems so, well, public. This is Evangelistic Dysfunction. And E.D. is hard to talk about. It's hard to concede that Jesus is our Judge. Do we also have to think of Christ as our King? Christ the King is a Sunday we celebrate with joy, and also with some confusion.

Are we to look ahead to the time when Christ will appear as King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Christ the King can be a challenging concept to grasp in a democratic country. Americans mistrust kings. We have no experience of kingliness, good, bad, or indifferent. A few days ago we celebrated Thanksgiving and recalled the pilgrims of old, who fled their earthly king in order to worship God in the manner they pleased. Though we might read past it in Bible study, we get Multiple Exposure to Christ as our Judge. Those of us who revere Christ the Good Shepherd have trouble with Christ the King, or with Christ the Judge. It's worth taking a little time to review the Gospel we have spent this church year with, Matthew. There have been signs that this was coming. Jesus has warned us, even if we have ignored him. Right off, John the Baptist prepares the way for a Christ of Judgment: His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (*Matt. 3:11-12*). Jesus gives more hints in Matthew 5, the Beatitudes, in the first words of the first sermon Jesus preaches. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth ... in the Day of Judgment. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy ... when Christ comes again. Some of us take the Sermon on the Mount as our moral compass – turn the other cheek, pray for those who persecute you,

give alms in secret, forgive others their debts,
 do unto others, do not judge.
 And yet, you will be judged.
 When he first introduces himself
 to his twelve disciples,
 Jesus is candid about his mission:
 Do not think that I have come
 to bring peace to the earth;
 I have not come to bring peace, but a sword (10:34).
 And a little later, Jesus adds,
 On the Day of Judgment
 you will have to give an account
 for every careless word you utter;
 for by your words you will be justified,
 and by your words you will be condemned (12:36-37).
 Jesus forecasts his mission upon return:
 The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory
 with his angels, and then he will reward each person
 according to what he has done (16:27).
 And let us not forget the parables we have heard
 from his final days of ministry.
 At the end of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants,
 Jesus warns, I tell you, the kingdom of God
 will be taken away from you
 and given to a people that produces
 the fruits of the kingdom (21:43).
 Last week we heard of the hapless fellow
 who fails to invest the master's money:
 For to all those who have, more will be given,
 and they will have an abundance;
 but from those who have nothing,
 even what they have will be taken away (25:29).
 Plenty of signs point to the coming Judgment,
 if we choose to see them.
 Today we hear, Sheep (the Saved) aren't aware
 they are Sheep until the Day of Judgment.
 I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
 [and] I was thirsty
 and you gave me something to drink,

[and] I was a stranger and you invited me in,
 [and] I needed clothes and you clothed me,
 [and] I was sick and you looked after me,
 [and] I was in prison and you came to visit me . . .
 . . . when you did this to the least of these my flock.”
 The sheep act with mercy to other people in need,
 again and again.
 Let's look at the actions of those
 whom Jesus calls Goats in today's passage:
 I was hungry and you gave me *nothing* to eat...
 Not so much as a scrap of food.
 I was thirsty and you gave me *nothing* to drink ...
 Not so much as a sip of water.
 I needed clothes and you did not clothe me ...
 Not even a hand-me-down sweater.
 I was sick and in prison
 and you did not inquire after me
 ... Not even a text or a Facebook post.
 The needy have Multiple Exposure to Goats –
 multiple exposure to people who ignore them.
 Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan?
 One person after another passes by
 the injured man on the side of the road.
 They are good people.
 But they see a need and do nothing.
 Poverty worsens human apathy.
 Dr. Paul Farmer has worked in
 infectious-disease control
 for nearly two decades and is a world authority
 on multidrug resistant tuberculosis.
 In his mid-thirties, he worked in Boston
 four months of the year,
 living in the rectory of a church in a slum.
 The rest of the year
 he worked without pay in Haiti,
 mainly doctoring peasants who had lost their land.
 His work in Haiti taught him that poverty,
 inequality, and political turmoil
 lead inevitably to poor health.

And this insight fuels his scholarly, clinical,
and charitable activities.
His medical mission to the poorest of the poor,
Partners in Health, was founded 30 years ago
and was chosen for the Heinz Award
for the Human Condition in 2003.
Whether to Liberia, Rwanda, or any other country,
PIH goes where it's needed most.
They form partnerships between local governments
and leading medical and academic institutions
to build capacity and strengthen health systems.
And they stay in the places they are needed,
committed to accompanying the people
they serve for the long term.
Partners in Health draws the world's attention to
the solvable problems of poverty-imposed illness.
He believes that we can do no less
than model Christ,
who mandated preferential treatment of the poor.
God wants us to be good shepherds like Dr. Farmer.
In the words of prophet Ezekiel.
"Seek the lost, and bring back the strays,
bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak."
Jesus of the Gospels had Multiple Exposure
to human need. Tirelessly, Jesus responded.
It's our faith in Jesus as the Son of God,
the one who was obedient to God
even to death on the cross,
that gives us the power to do
what we otherwise would not and could not do.
By faith, we enjoy God's grace.
And because of grace,
we are able to grow beyond our sinful nature.
In Christ, we are able to respond to
Multiple Exposure to human need
without compassion fatigue.
Meeting others in their deepest needs
we may also meet ourselves –
our own needs, our own vulnerabilities.
And we meet the living Christ.

CONCLUSION

Our lesson raises the stakes for ethical behavior.
Nothing less than our eternal fate
depends on our ethics concerning human need.
The path is simple, yet hard to follow.
It's not how pious we are,
or how well we know scriptures,
or how deeply we understand the mind of God.
What matters in the end is our ethical behavior
toward one another.
C. S. Lewis figured out the connection
between faith and works:
"If you read history you will find that
the Christians who did the most
for the present world
were just those who thought most of the next.
The English evangelicals
who abolished the slave trade
left their mark on earth,
precisely because their minds
were occupied with heaven ...
Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in."
Preaching on today's gospel text,
the reformer Martin Luther noted that the passage
promises both a Last Judgment by works
and a Salvation by grace:
"Here below, here below, says Christ,
you find me in the poor:
I am too high for you in heaven.
The high command of love
is written with golden letters
on the foreheads of the poor,
so that we can see and grasp
how near Christ is to us on this planet."
It's not fear of judgment
that motivates benevolence,
but Multiple Exposure to God's love
expressed in Christ.
Amen.