

Matthew 25:31-46 – Kent Dunnington

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I want to talk with you this morning about the difference between philanthropy and friendship, between charity and communion. And I want to do this by tweaking just a little bit the picture that most of us have in our minds of this dramatic judgment scene in today's gospel reading. I want to suggest a paradigm shift, and then ask about the difference that shift makes.

We are all familiar with the notion of a paradigm shift. Probably the most famous illustration of a paradigm shift is the duck-rabbit optical illusion. Have you seen this one? It is a simple drawing of a duck. Or is it a rabbit? Well, both, really, depending on how you look at it. Once you have figured it out, you can actually switch back and forth in your mind, looking now at the "duck," now at the "rabbit," although you are looking at the exact same drawing all along. And, most importantly, neither of them—neither duck nor rabbit—is the "right" answer.

I think that when we hear the passage from today's gospel, most of us, if not all of us, see it the same way. How do we see it? Well, we picture all of us—every single human being in the history of the world—standing before the throne of God. And Jesus asks each person, How did you treat all the poor, sick, hungry, homeless, and imprisoned people? If we were merciful to this lot, we get to go to heaven. If we were not, we have to go to hell. That's the picture we have, is it not? And it is a perfectly appropriate picture to have in mind, just as it is perfectly appropriate to see a duck instead of a rabbit. In fact, it is an understatement to say that it's merely "appropriate," because this standard interpretation has provided the biblical mandate, down through the centuries, for many of the churches most holy experiments—I think here of Francis of Assisi, Mother Theresa, and Dorothy Day, to name just a few, each of whom returned again and again to this picture of Jesus being really present in every single person who suffers. So, I do not want to abandon this interpretation. Rather, I want to offer an alternative interpretation, and see if we can learn anything from it.

There are two key verses that suggest a different possible picture, verse 32 and verse 40. Verse 32 speaks of "the nations." "Before the son of man will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Who are "the nations?" Everywhere else in Matthew and indeed throughout the whole Jewish tradition out of which Matthew writes, "the nations" always means "unbelieving Gentiles," "the nations" is always a contrast group to the group of God's chosen people. So there is one possible tweak in the picture: it is not all of humanity that is approaching the throne of judgment, but specifically unbelieving humanity, "the nations." And we get another possible tweak in verse 40, which speaks of "the least of these who are members of my family," or, as the King James says, "the least of these my brethren." Jesus judges "the nations" on the basis of how they have

treated the lowliest members of his family. But who, exactly, is Jesus' family? Everywhere else in Matthew the familial language of "brethren" or "my brothers" or "members of my family" always means: those who follow me and proclaim my name. "My family," for Jesus, always means, "my disciples." So here is the second tweak: the "least of these" is not just any group of down and outers; rather, the "least of these" are specifically disciples of Jesus.

So if we take seriously the likely way in which these terms—"the nations" and "my family"—function in this biblical text, we get a quite different picture. We get a picture of the final judgment with not just two groups of people—the sheep and the goats—but really three different groups of people—the sheep, the goats, and the faithful disciples of Jesus.

We have King Jesus seated on his throne surrounded by his faithful church, Jews first but also faithful Gentile followers of Jesus. Then we have unbelievers who appear before the throne for judgment, row after row of unbelieving humanity. And as they come, Jesus will point some of the unbelievers to the right and some to the left, just as a shepherd in Jesus' day would separate the sheep from the goats. To those on the right he will say, welcome to the kingdom that I have prepared for you. You are welcome because when I was hungry you fed me. When I was thirsty you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, a foreigner, you welcomed me. When I was naked you gave me clothes. When I was sick you cared for me. When I was in jail you visited me. And they will say, King Jesus, when did we do this? This is the first time we've ever seen you. And then Jesus will raise his arm and motion in the direction of his faithful followers, Jews first and also Gentile followers, and say to the unbelievers on the right: Do you see all of these seated with me on the thrones? These are my brothers and sisters and mothers, my family (Mt. 12:50). Whatever you did to these least of these members of my family you did unto me.

But to those unbelievers who are directed to go to the left, King Jesus will say, Depart from me, I never knew you, you are strangers and foreigners to me. Why? they will cry. And King Jesus will say: Because when I was hungry you did not feed me. And when I was thirsty you did not give me drink. And when I was a stranger, a foreigner you did not welcome me. When I was naked, you didn't give me clothes. And when I was sick you didn't care for me. And when I was in jail, you didn't visit me. And those on the left will say, King Jesus, how could we have? This is the first time we've ever seen you. And then Jesus will raise his arm and motion in the direction of his faithful followers, Jews first and also Gentile followers, and say to the unbelievers on the left: Do you see all of these seated with me on the thrones? These are my brothers and sisters and mothers (Mt. 12:50). Whatever you did to the least of these members of my family you did unto me.

What are we to make of this picture, with its three different groups of people participating in the judgment day? This is not what we see at first, is it? We normally think that everyone will approach the throne on equal footing – Christians mixed in with nonChristians – and then the decisions will be made. But that is not how Matthew sees it. In fact, that is not really how the bible as a whole sees it. Take for example 1 Corinthians 6:2. Paul asks, "Do you not know that

the saints will judge the world?" So Paul too has this picture of the faithful followers of Jesus, those to whom King Jesus refers as "members of my family," sitting in a different place on judgment day than the rest of world.

But even if we admit that this is a biblical view of judgment, what does it mean for us today? If you are like me, you are probably uncomfortable with this picture. Why should we get special treatment? Who are we to judge? We're just like everybody else. We want to be held to the same standards. Especially if you, like me, sometimes worry that the church, particularly the church in America, already has enough swagger in its walk, already is guilty of the holier-than-thou syndrome—if you worry like me about these things, then this picture of the church holding a special spot might strike you as downright repugnant. We in the church are the ones who should receive the harshest judgment, some might say. And, I think that all of these worries are exactly right.

But, this passage is by no means an invitation to the church to swagger with pride and authority. "It is crucial to note that the passage calls these Christians 'the least,' not 'the greatest'; they come to the world not in limousines and silk, but hungry and thirsty. They are not the power elite or the moral majority, forcing their will on the nations; they are identified with the weak of the earth and are more likely to be found in hospitals and prisons than in palaces. It will be followers of Jesus who are hungry and thirsty, followers of Jesus who are strangers in a foreign land, followers of Jesus who are naked and homeless, followers of Jesus who are in prison. Indeed, the shock of this parable is that no one – not the goats and not even the sheep – recognized Christ because they assumed that the majestic, triumphant Lord of all time would surely appear as a powerful presence in history. But this is not God's way in the world" (Long). The Christian church is sent out to the world to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it goes into the world living just as Jesus lived, he who had "nowhere to lay his head" (Mt. 8:20).

Now we must ask ourselves, as members of Christ's church, and as the church called St. Paul's, do we see ourselves in this picture? How does this picture of the final judgment judge us as a group of disciples, as church? If we imagine ourselves in the last days, seated around the throne of Jesus, could he point to us and then say to the nations, "Whatever you have done to the least of these my family members, whatever you have done to these hungry, thirsty, poor, homeless, imprisoned brothers and sisters from St. Paul's Free Methodist Church, you have done unto me. Can we receive that acknowledgement from King Jesus? Have we been his faithful followers in such a way that these things could be said truly of us?"

At this point, perhaps you are thinking to yourself, now wait just a minute here, are you trying to tell us that if each of us is not hungry, thirsty, sick, naked or in jail then we aren't disciples? No, I'm not saying that and the scripture is not saying that. Similarly, the beatitudes are not prescriptive in that way. Jesus is not saying, all you who want to follow me must become meek, must start mourning, must find some way to get yourself persecuted. No! Rather, what he is saying is: wherever the church is faithful to its calling, do not be surprised to find in your midst those who are meek, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for my sake. In fact, Jesus is

saying, if you claim to be my faithful community and there is no one in your community that looks like this, then you aren't following me; you are following some other god. Similarly, when we hear this account of the final judgment from the lips of Jesus, we must ask, are we as a community of the followers of Jesus Christ so faithful to his calling that there are those among us who go hungry, that there are those among us who go thirsty, that there are those among us who go to strange and foreign lands, that there are those among us who accept homelessness, that there are those among us who are imprisoned on account of their righteousness. If we are not the kind of the community that expects and finds these people in our midst, then we have to ask whether we can be called members of Jesus' family. We have to repent and say, you know, that's not true of us.

Far from letting us off the hook from the standard, humanitarian interpretation, this reading intensifies the humanitarian read. Now, it is not enough for the church to reach out to the marginalized and the underprivileged from its position of power and privilege. Now we see that Jesus always expected that his true church would be among the most marginalized and underprivileged in all of society, indeed that his church would be a church of the marginalized and underprivileged. Lest we forget, this is what the beatitudes are about. And this means that, if we are truly church, then our relationship to the least of these must be one of friendship rather than philanthropy, one of communion rather than charity. The least of these must become "our people" and not just "our project."

As we move toward the Eucharist, we remember the shape of discipleship to which we have been called. That is, after all, what the Eucharist is: it is a participation in the broken body of Jesus Christ: the hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick, and imprisoned body of Jesus Christ. And as we participate in this body, we acknowledge our calling to follow Jesus into the world in this very same shape – to be the community who not only partakes in acts of mercy to the least of our human brothers and sisters, but who by the nature of our faithfulness to the call of Jesus also finds the least of these to be constitutive of who we are.

Amen.