

Whatever You Did for the Least of My Brothers
November 22, 2020 Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Matthew 25:31 – 46

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A frequent conversation that my husband, Alek, and I have is that we are now officially “old.” Those of you who are older than us may scoff, but those of you who are younger than us are internally nodding your heads. We’re 35, and if you’re younger than us, you think we’re old. Ancient, even. I am so old, in fact, that my pregnancy is officially called a “geriatric pregnancy,” and it’s ok – I wear that title with pride.

I first realized that I was old when I turned 30. I was working with a youth group, and they asked how old I was. I told them, and they corporately paused (**picture**) and finally said something like, “It’s ok. We still like you.”

When I was in college, now a long time ago, Facebook (**icon**) became popular. As I looked on my friends’ walls, I noticed a common trend. For their religious affiliation, many wrote “followers of Jesus” instead of “Christian.” As I think back on this, I *continue* to wonder what they meant. Did they write “follower of Jesus” because they were anti-institutional but were still a part of a local church? Did they write this because they were *not* a part of a local church but lived a private faith? Or was their statement an effort to save their *reputation*, not wanting to be lumped in with the hypocrites, the moral failures, the judgmental, and the power-hungry?

If their statement was to save their *reputation*, I *get* it. It’s *painful* to hear about the sex scandals in churches, where leaders who don’t get help until it’s too late. It’s *painful* to hear the history of denominations – that some were formed *so that* they could retain slaves. It’s *painful* to

see Christians who support political candidates because they don't want to lose power in government. It's *painful* to be lumped in with those who use the name of Jesus to their own advantage and wield the Bible as a weapon to exclude. I don't like being associated with them *either*.

As a 2007 Barna study showed, these were some of the top items listed in young people's perceptions – both of those inside and those outside the church. They saw the church as hypocritical, judgmental, too involved in politics, and anti-homosexual.¹ And, what comes as no surprise, is the increasing number of those who do *not* identify as Christians.² **(graph)** Generally young people *agree* – the Jesus shown in Scripture is attractive, but the way that many Christians live out their faith is *not*.

So, what do we do with this sad reality? Do we claim to be “Lutherans” instead of “Christians”? Do we do our best to create as much distance between those hypocritical Christians and us? Let's let Scripture inform us, from the Gospel of Matthew.

In Matthew 25, Jesus is with his disciples on the Mount of Olives. **(picture)** They have just left the beautiful temple, where Jesus has told them that “not one stone...[would] be left on another; every one [would] be thrown down” (Matt 25:2b). His disciples ask when this will take place and what sign he will give of his coming and of the end of the age. Jesus warns them not to be looking for signs, but to watch out(!) because many will come, claiming to be him. Jesus will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, and they are to be ready! He tells them a series of four parables: (1) about a master who goes away and puts his servants in charge, (2) about wise and foolish virgins, (3) talents entrusted to servants, and (4) sheep and goats.

¹ <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1667639,00.html>

² <https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity/>

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, we hear of the Son of Man returning “in his glory, and all the angels with him...All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matt 25:31 – 32). The sheep then seem to be rewarded for their kindness and the goats are punished for their badness. This parable ends up sounding like a Santa Clause parable: the nice kids get presents, but the naughty kids get a lump of coal. So be good for goodness’ sake! But if we look at the parable more closely, it’s *not* so straightforward.

Perhaps you, like me, have heard one or more of these verses in an advertisement to give to the less fortunate. Perhaps you’ve seen a picture (**picture**) of a child with an empty cup and heard the verse, “I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.” Or, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.” I by no means say this to criticize or to be skeptical, but I want to be sure that we all hear more than those two verses and gain a greater appreciation of this parable.

First, when the king separates the sheep from the goats, do the sheep *recognize* how they have cared for the king, and do the goats recognize how they have *failed* to care for the king? No. The sheep ask, (**verses 37 - 39**) “Lord, *when* did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? *When* did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? *When* did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” Likewise, the goats don’t know when they have *failed* to care for the king when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, needing clothes, sick, or in prison. *Both* are surprised. *Neither* group knew how the king would judge; some simply *did* unknowingly care for the king and were rewarded, and some unknowingly did *not* and were punished.

Second, there's another part of this parable that is often overlooked. Take a look at verse 40. **(verse 40)** "The king will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" Did you catch it? It *doesn't* say, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me." But, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these *brothers of mine*, you did for me." Some of us know this passage so well, that we gloss right over these three words, "brothers of mine." But the question is: Does it make any difference? Does "brother" mean anything in Matthew?

Pastor Jim Cords and I debated this last week, and as much as I may hate to admit it, *he* was right. "Brother" means something *specific* in Matthew.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear about disciples of Jesus who are *biological* brothers – Peter and Andrew, and James and John. And in chapter 12, we hear a story of Jesus' mother and brothers who want to speak with him. Jesus replies, **(verse 48)** "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he [says] 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus *redefines* "brother." *Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*

So, back to our parable. The least of the king's brothers are ones who do the will of our Father in heaven. The ones who care for them *also* are brothers, because *they* do the will of our Father in heaven. In this parable, the ones who receive *and* offer care, are *brothers*, fellow Christians.

Often, it's the ones closest to us that are the *most* difficult to love. They know our pasts, our sins, how to hurt us, and how to annoy us. They know *just* how to push our buttons. It would be so much easier to write them off, and pretend that they don't exist.

Just *maybe*, this parable was written for such a time as this.

This openly divided and hostile time in our nation has *not* left the church unaffected.

There has been a game played around us, where there are winners and there are losers. We have *felt* this polarization in our hearts, and in response, we have wanted to be winners, the ones in the *right*. We have begun to be concerned about what history will say about us, and if we will be on the “right side” of history. But our vision is limited, and though we may align ourselves with the “right” causes and candidates, the question remains: How have we loved our neighbors and, most importantly, how have we loved our brothers and sisters?

Here at St. Timothy’s, we are *not* all the same. We do *not* all align with a particular political party or ideology. And that’s a *good thing*. We can vote differently, kindly challenge one another, point to blind spots, and *still* care for and love one another. As difficult as this season has been, and continues to be, I have been *impressed* and *encouraged* by the unity of this congregation.

Unity is not for suckers. It requires grace for others, a recognition of oneself – how flawed and short-sighted you and I can be, and a deep understanding of who God is. As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:19 – 21, **(1 John 4:19 – 21)** “We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a *liar*. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” And as Jesus prayed in John 17, **(John 17:21)** “I pray...that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in me and I am in You. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent me.”

When we are unified, when we love and care for other Christians, the world *will* see, and that love will be extended to them. They will *experience* that love in tangible acts like a

Thanksgiving meal, a warm blanket, and a beautiful quilt. They will gain greater trust with us, recognizing that they don't have to explore this life of faith on their own; they can have brothers and sisters who will walk with them and love them unconditionally. They can have brothers and sisters who will feed them, give them something to drink, invite them in, clothe them, and be visited while sick or in prison.

May this song be true in us, and may Christ reign as king of our lives!

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yeah they'll know we are Christians by our love³

³ <https://www.untiedmusic.com/ezekiel/onespirt.html>