

“And You Did What?”

This first thing I need to point out is that today’s Gospel is a parable. It is not a prophecy; nor is it a literal description of the end-times. But I have also to emphasize: this is about the end-times. Jesus spent His last discussion with the Twelve (what is called the Final Discourse) focused on the end times — three parables in a row: the wise and foolish virgins, the talents, and now this, known as The Parable of the Final Judgment or The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

It seems that Jesus wants us to know a few things. You need to be ready for the end; you won’t know when it’s coming. Commit yourself to doing God’s business and trust that you are doing what God wants you to do.

That point is made more emphatically in this third and final parable. Since this is Jesus’ Final Discourse, and thus His last word (His ultimate word), we need to give it special attention. Jesus knew what was coming for Him; He also knew what lay ahead for the Twelve; so this is important stuff.

I have a love/hate relationship with this text.

I hate it (okay, it bothers me), because it *seems* to make works the requirement for being blessed by God. There is no apparent mention of faith or justification or forgiveness or the cross — the acts of God that bring us salvation. Rather, the text is all about human actions.

I hate it (okay, again, it bothers me) from a counseling standpoint, because doing things for others can create co-dependent relationships between the helper and those in need. We have usually answered the question: *“Am I my brother’s keeper?”* with *“Yes.”* We are to take care of our needy brothers and sisters. This parable would support that answer. However, if we look at this answer from another perspective, we may want to change our response. Zoos have keepers. Insane

asylums have “keepers.” Such “kept” animals are unable to survive on their own; sometimes we may “keep” people in a similar bondage. So, we need to struggle with how we can best care for the needy as Jesus’ parable says we should. How can we do it in a way that doesn’t put them or us into bondage?

On the other hand, I love this text, because these good works are not at all works that “earn us heaven” because the doers of them don’t realize that they have done anything good. Caring for other people is such a part of their (the “sheep,” the redeemed) nature, that the caring acts come naturally, perhaps even unconsciously — like a good tree naturally producing good fruit. A tree doesn’t have to “think” about producing fruit. That just happens. Fruit production is part of the tree’s nature. In the same way, the “goats” don’t realize that they have done anything wrong.

“The Great Surprise ” may be a more appropriate title to this parable than “The Final Judgment.” Both groups are surprised when they hear about their good deeds (or lack thereof). *“Goodness is not planned. It is not a heroic decision or clever calculation. It is an expression of who we are,”* writes Anthony B. Robinson

And yet, as John Jewell writes: *“Christ has no way to reach out to the lost and hurting – the hungry, thirsty, naked or sick without his people. Because we are the Body of Christ, we are called to be for others what Jesus Christ would be if he were here in the flesh. And above all things, if he were here in the flesh, his life would still be directed by a heart of compassion. The heart of God.”*

A lot is being made the past few years about what is called “compassion fatigue.” With hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, horrendous snowstorms, and of course now a pandemic . . . people are being asked to help in ways that have stretched them more thinly perhaps than ever before. Here at St. Thomas also: we have tried to keep up with caring for hurting people through such avenues as the Community Food Center, and next Sunday, Lutheran Metropolitan

Ministry . And maybe some are thinking — “*Somebody needs to yell ‘Stop! It’s getting to be too much.’*”

But it cannot be too much. People are still hurting.

In Haiti, ten years after a devastating earthquake, more than 150,000 still live in plywood and plastic structures. Nine years after the earthquake in Japan ruptured a nuclear power plant, the people near that facility still have no homes to return to. Now countless people face the destruction of their homes from the weight of snow crushing on their roofs, or flooding ruining their foundations, or wildfires consuming their entire community, or six hurricanes in a row wreaking devastation.

Just about every week people are coming in or calling here to seek assistance with food, rent, a few bucks to buy a shirt so that they can start a new job, secure medications. Daily over the next four weeks we will read about, hear about stories of people who are burned out of their homes; fell victim to some debilitating disease; were injured by some act of cruelty; or were just plain to unlucky to have been born into poverty.

“Coats for Kids” . . . “Toys for Tots” . . . Salvation Army at every corner, every mall. We are hit from every angle — and the temptation is to say: “*That’s all I can do; I can’t do any more!*”

There will come a time when the resources that have been under our stewardship will be exhausted; all resources, save one, are limited. We need to recognize that this temptation toward “compassion fatigue” is indeed a temptation out of our own brokenness, our sinfulness, and from the Evil One who loves nothing better than to beat us down into despair. We need to listen to the voice of Jesus over and over and over again: “*I was hungry . . . I was thirsty . . . I was alone . . .”*

The only inexhaustible resource is love. That resource never runs out because the source of our loving is Christ’s own love.

Which brings me to a second temptation we all face in this process. Because we embrace that old adage: “*Actions speak louder than words,*” it is easy for us to become convinced that our actions are all that matter.

Wesley White writes: “*What the world needs above all is not bread and water and clothing, but the truth and the hope that God entrusted to his chosen people. Christians would be unfaithful to their mission if they confined themselves to merely talking about assistance, housing and the like and forgot what is really life for humankind – first, the knowledge and love of their Lord. He will always be first and we need him to be so for us. He takes as done to himself all that we do for our sisters and brothers but does not want to be confused with them.*”

Jesus does point to the action and inaction of those before Him in this Final Parable, and He does reject the notion that inaction on behalf of those who do not have what they need can be the mark of His people. But we are ***His*** people! Somewhere along the line we need to point those we help to the greater good of knowing Him.

I am not talking about the format used by many a soup kitchen: “*You listen to the sermon, and then we will feed you — but only if you listen to the sermon.*” That’s blackmail, not ministry. It essentially blocks the message of grace by saying that you have to earn it by your attentiveness. I am saying that our deeds are not enough without us positioning toward Christ the people He wants us to help.

“***When did we see you . . . ?***” both sheep and goats ask Jesus. There’s another question that goes with that: “*When did we help those in need to see Jesus? Or were we more concerned with how well they thought of us?*” If you are more concerned about how people view you than that they come to see Jesus — you have some work to do on humility.

In today’s First Lesson, the prophet Ezekiel is given the message to proclaim that announces God’s direct intervention for His people. This was necessitated by a series of kings (whom God refers to as

“shepherds”) who squandered the nation’s resources for personal gain (something I’m glad to say never happens in our body politic???). Jesus announces a return to the divine plan that His people would care for His people. Our King — Christ the King — does not waste God’s good gifts, and neither can His people. We do not reach out to help the needy, care for the hurting, provide community for the outcast and lonely because in so doing we hope to win the favor of our King. We do it because we already have the favor of our King — announced to us on a cross, and sealed to us by His Holy Spirit working in us.

St. Paul describes that Spirit’s work thus: that *“you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”*

Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way: *“That’s why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the Christians, I couldn’t stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I’d think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength! All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which*

he fills everything with his presence.” (The Message)

Jesus announces that when He returns there will be some questions to be asked. This first question is unspoken: “*Did you belong to Me?*” It is answered in the dividing of the sheep from the goats. To Jesus’ first hearers there would be no confusion about what this meant; they were familiar with apocalyptic imagery and understood this meant that, while all the flock was the shepherd’s, sheep seem to follow the Shepherd; goats are somewhat more independent (read there “disobedient”).

In making the division, Jesus renders a judgment [the Greek word He uses is ἀφορίζω (aphorizo), which means “to mark off” — a word used only here in the NT] — in much the same way that professional golfers put some mark on their ball so that there is no question whose it is. So the issue of faith and relationship with Jesus is established long before any words are spoken, and (in that sense) judgment announced.

In fact, the words are no judgment at all — they are what words always are: signposts. When I say the words “telephone pole” you know what I mean; I don’t need to bring in a telephone pole and say, “*This!*” If I say the word “Sphygmomanometer,” the nurses will know what I mean; the rest may need help (it’s the tool used to read your blood pressure). How many of you know what “dottle” is?

In every case, we don’t need the object; we can use words to name or describe, and we comprehend. Conversely, when I say “think of a dog” you do not have the word “dog” pop into your head, you get the picture image of a dog (maybe your dog, or the dog from your childhood).

So Jesus’ words become signs to us for what we should be looking at and looking for when we want to know the nature of our relationship with Christ.

It's this simple: When you get to a point when you are tired, exhausted, "compassion fatigued," stressed out, maybe a little angry, feeling somewhat used, overwhelmed, couldn't go on with one more request for assistance, aid, or help . . . ask this question (it's the one Jesus answers with today's parable): "*And you did and said what?*"

Amen.