

At First Sight
Menno Mennonite Church
November 26, 2023

Purpose: To remind the congregation of the gift of God's vision for the world.

Message: As people of the kingdom we are invited to take on the vision of the kingdom as we seek Christ in all places.

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46 (I will read); Ephesians 1:15-23 (Please read—will be a closely complementary text for the sermon).

Synopsis: The world and its complications can be daunting to consider. There are times where we don't want to look at what that which we see from day to day. Sometimes it is far easier to turn away than to engage the ongoing messiness around us. Yet through faith we are called to God's corrected vision of all that is that sees things with clarity, yes, but also with the hope of the kingdom coming. It is with these eyes that we are meant to live into the world as we find it, knowing Christ in all who we meet.

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man
comes in his glory,
and all the angels with him,
then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

³² All the nations will be gathered before him,
and he will separate people one from another
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand
and the goats at the left.

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand,

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father,
inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him,
‘Lord,
when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,
or thirsty and gave you something to drink?’

³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,
or naked and gave you clothing?’

³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

⁴⁰ And the king will answer them,
‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these
who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand,

‘You that are accursed,
depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer,
‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry
or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison,
and did not take care of you?’

⁴⁵ Then he will answer them,
‘Truly I tell you,
just as you did not do it to one of the least of these,
you did not do it to me.’

⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment,
but the righteous into eternal life.”

I think we can all remember that there were two types of attention when we were sitting in school: the work-a-day listening where one would cruise through the materials and ideas being presented, and the sharpened rustling what would accompany the phrase “this will be on the test.” That is when we are given to perking up, writing things down and making the most out of what we would know was to face us in the imminent future. Otherwise, there are day-dreams to have, flies to study on the wall and the antics that go on in any classroom. In my brief fore as a teacher, I learned quickly to listen for the many phrasings and equivocations that would probe the real question just buried ever so shallowly underneath the surface: Is this something that I actually need to take onto myself or not. It speaks to the human condition more times than not. We all do it. I never can fully shake the image of my math teacher Mr. Powell, a genial and lovely teacher of the art of calculation every time I find myself wanting to find the area of a shape with a curve in it—that fundamental of pre-calculus for which I was quite convinced that there was no conceivable application for so didn’t take all that seriously. Do I generally find my clumsy way through this the problem on the occasions it arises: yes sooner or later. But that doesn’t stop the echo in my head that says “see, I told you this would come up.”

This passage for today is the ultimate test. We know it as such. It is the capstone teaching moment for him right before we have the accounting of the passion. You may have heard this referred to as the parable of the last judgement though it is not a parable in the common sense. There is no homespun tail with stand characters and ideas that stand in as metaphors for what is actually being talked about. Instead we are given a vision of the world receiving its final judgment at the end of all things with its cosmic massiveness well intact.

It is an awesome vision that Jesus gives us. “The Son of God will come in glory and all the angels with him and sit on the throne of glory. All the nations will stand before him and he will separate them as sheep from the goats.” It’s big, far bigger than any attempt that Hollywood could put on it. It is quite the ending with quite the gathering before him. It is one scene that I have tried to envision myself but I find myself strongly suspecting that I am quite profoundly missing the idea, and it will be one of these things that will be a surprise for us all, no matter how fertile our imaginations.

But what are we to do with this, knowing that we will never quite be able to wrap our heads around what is going on here, so awesome is the scene and notions involved. What do we do with the message we are given?

One thing that needs to be said clearly and keenly is the obvious: at the end of it all there will be judgement. If there were not judgement, there could be no ultimate hope of justice. The one who puts all things together will in the fullness of time and take all things apart not for the sake of wanton destruction and retribution as we might sometimes glean from the popular imagination, but judgement all the same. I have had the opportunity to attend the occasion of several hearings to impose sentences. Sometimes I went in the name of being present for those who were hoping for some measure of closure in hearing the penalty imposed for something done to them and their loved ones. Other times I went in the company of the ones who were to be sentenced. The one who were to stand and hear their fate not always knowing whether they were free to return home even that evening. In both cases, there were no questions of facts: that had already been established and decided upon. This was a day of consequences and of speaking of the consequences received in some cases and the offender's offer of contrition that would never serve to heal the wounds inflicted but was all there was to be offered. At the end of it all there is the summary judgment, the pronouncement of sentence, and, for some, the commencement of their imprisonment. In all the cases it is a holy day of inflection around which lives will turn from there on out. For me, it is this image that stuck with me as I sat with the image of the judge here and the meaning that is being presented.

It is this that is going on here. This is no court room drama; there are no arguments, objections or evidence. Perry Mason is not on duty. Instead, the trial has been concluded. The ways of everyone have come to a point where the test has been given and they are evaluated accordingly. Perhaps that is what causes us most unease about this picture. That there is just the pronouncement of what is, and not a whole lot more. We are at the end in this vision, and the divine one is implementing what is and there really is nothing more to say. The point of inflection has come and that is the end of it.

But the high judge is not the only image at work here. There is the familiar image of the shepherd, the one doing the dividing. In a culture where sheep and goats were herded together and with equal care and investment. Separating the goats and sheep was a common practice to go from open grazing to the protection of the barns and pens. Goats required a bit more shelter than the sheep herd, and the division was made to ensure that everyone was taken care of at the level that they required. The one who is the good shepherd is also the one that is the good judge

as well. I think we can trust the level of care and concern that the good shepherd brings even when the final judgement is coming.

But we know that categorizing people into groups is the gateway to a whole multitude of truly dark places. We know of the many artificial and arbitrary divisions and stratifications that humanity has employed for time out of mind have caused untold marginalization and oppression. We have justified war, segregation, dehumanization and genocide on the back of the divisions of peoples and the pseudoscience that we invented to support the categories that we have put in place. Indeed, what I think most significant this scene of judgement is not the abject contrasts to be drawn between those of the left and those on the right so much as there are the similarities. Neither group has the vision clear enough to discern Jesus among the crowds. Both are nothing if not surprised. The whole day seems precisely to be one of shock as both groups try to recollect the moments where they could have seen Jesus before them. They do not pick up the Christ on their radar, and they are both left shocked for want of seeing. Sometimes I am given to wonder whether the whole point of this vision that Jesus gives was to level the playing field and let the disciples know that they simply were not equipped to discern the good from the bad in the first place and so should simply serve all alike no matter what. When you serve the great or the small, you are serving Christ. Full stop. You need not read further. As Mother Teresa was often quoted that “it is in the poor that we meet Jesus in distressing disguise.

What makes the moment of judgement so tough is that there is no way to study for the test. Jesus was often pelted with the question “what must I do in order to be saved?” It is the human condition. We are all looking for a formula for salvation: the right prayer, the proper method and means of baptism, the proper doctrinal notions that satisfy and sustain the life of faith. We are looking for it in order to convince ourselves that having done the proper things in the proper way we can absolutely assure ourselves that we are fully prepared and ready to go.

But this too is short sighted. We may come to the family of faith only by faith—*sola fide*—faith alone as the reformers would have it. But the message must be this. Grace and faith are great, but they must be the seeds from which a full life of faith then grows. On the great judgement day that Jesus lays out for us, it all comes down to works. It’s the actions of faith not the words that matter. There are no catechism questions. No one is asked if they invited Jesus into their hears or were even baptized. Jesus’ judgement here is about what you did, not what you believed; how you acted, not what you confessed.

Not that this is easy. It will always stretch us to consider the judgement in this way—the way in which, if we are genuine, we have to leave up to God. The judgement is up to God; ours is the living of the life not in a let-me-do-what-I-must-because-it-will-be-on-the-final sort of way of thinking of which we are so fond, but the far more authentic and integrated way of simply doing the work of the kingdom of God no matter what.

Note here that these things are the workings of the kingdom. The blessed are commended for the seemingly mundane, not the massive and overwhelming. Here we are not healing the sick but caring for them. It is not liberating the prisoners; it is visiting them. The criteria are not a tally of social structures overturned and injustices put to rights (though they of course are still part of the life that we lead). Yet Jesus never allows us to take our eyes off the individual—that needy, irritating, possibly undeserving person right in front of us. For it is in the individual that we are allowed to meet the Christ with us.

Judgement will come as judgement must. We will be judged not by the level of brownie points that we have accumulated nor the stars on our crowns, but by the degree the grace of God has found purchase in our lives as known through our actions. In this we can look to the Lord with confidence, hope and promise.

May God's gift of surprise be ours as we meet the Christs all around us, now and always.