

I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me 3

Matthew 25:31-46

As the shadow of the cross stretched across Jesus' final days he told a parable depicting final judgment Jesus indicated that the King of the Universe separates the righteous from the unrighteous like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The King holds the practice of compassion as the basis of the judgment of the nations (Gentiles). This challenges some of our theology of a reduced Gospel fixated on the afterlife rather than the world of the here and now. To Jesus, the practice of compassion reveals real faith.

I begin today with a parable. Help me get started today by fixing in your mind a 32 year old woman, and her 3 year old son. Sylvia came to church that morning holding hands with her 3-year-old Timmy. Sylvia was recently divorced and won custody of Timmy every other weekend. She was not a regular church-goer since her marriage five years earlier. She attended only on Christmas and Easter. Life had thrown her a curve ball. Her marriage ended badly with a painful divorce. She lost several close friends through the ordeal and felt awkward around her ex-husband's friends. She worked long hours as a waitress in a dead-end job that offered little hope of advancement. She felt she had lost direction in her life and her heart ached with emptiness. She wanted to have something to give her son. Sylvia thought perhaps church may help her meet some new people and find a little hope. So she loaded up Timmy and headed for church.

When she arrived, she went to the closest double door only to find it locked. The one next to it was also locked. No one posted a sign to say, go to other door around the side. No one was there to tell her. She noticed everyone else heading towards the side door, so she joined the flow. Once inside the lobby she joined people milling around, talking to one another. They seemed not to notice her and Timmy. The building was unfamiliar. She wondered, 'where should we go?' She followed several younger people with Timmy in tow. They went up the stairs and down the long corridor and all turned into a class marked *Single's Class*. She wondered if they considered a recent divorcee single, or were formerly married people welcomed in the *singles* class. What should she do with Timmy? She went back down the hall back to the lobby. She spotted a woman and asked, "I'm new here. Is there a class or nursery for my child?" "I don't know. I am new, too. This is my first time. Sorry."

Sylvia waited a few minutes and headed down another hall. She saw a classroom with small chairs. A woman inside was busy arranging the room for a class. She stuck her head in the door. "Excuse me. Is this a class for children?" "Yes. But how old is your son?" "Three and a half". "Then he is too young for this class. This is for the kindergarten class. The nursery is down the hall." "Oh, Ok." Sylvia started down the hall, but it looked like no one was down that way. She stuck her head in again. "Um, can you tell me which way down the hall?" "To the right." The teacher said not looking up. Sylvia wondered, 'to my right or to the right going out of the door?' She didn't want to ask again, so she headed down the way she thought the woman had indicated.

There were no lights on in any room. However, she found one classroom marked “nursery” with toys, bean bag chairs and a table appropriate for very small children. No one came, so she returned again to the first teacher who was now welcoming a few kindergarten children. “Um, I think I found the nursery, but no one is there.” “O yes, Gail Freeman is the teacher but she often comes late. You can just go there and wait if you want.” So Sylvia and Timmy went back and waited. About ten minutes passed when a woman came to the room and said, “I’m sorry, are you waiting for the nursery teacher?” “Yes”. “O dear! Gail called in and she isn’t coming today. We usually don’t have any nursery children. If you like you can take your son into the sanctuary.” “Are children allowed in during the service?” “I think so. I am not sure. But service won’t start for another few minutes.” Sylvia and Timmy then went in search of the sanctuary. It was a long way but she finally found it. An usher handed her a bulletin without making eye contact. As she was about to enter he said, “Ma’am, you do know we have a nursery in the education wing. You should take your son there.” “I already did, but no one was there so a lady told me to come here and that I could bring him in with me.” The usher looked away. Sylvia wondered, “What do I do?” Since music started in the sanctuary Sylvia and Timmy entered and sat down near the back. No one greeted them. During the service Sylvia noticed that two boys across the aisle talked and giggled the through the whole service as they played a Gameboy. A young man on the same row sent and received text messages the whole service.

Although the organist played the hymns with flourish, the congregation sung hardly above a whisper. A man in front of her examined his watch and grew visibly irritated as the service progressed. A teenager cleaned out his wallet and stuffed the scraps of paper in the hymnbook rack. Behind Sylvia one couple whispered to one another. That was distracting and made listening an effort. During the pastoral prayer a cell phone rang nearby with a silly tune. It took half a minute of the woman digging around in her purse to find the thing and shut it off. She left the service hastily to recall.

It became clear that the sermon addressed people over fifty. Sylvia noticed that most of the people were over fifty. But nothing was said that remotely related to her. However, she listened carefully to hear anything that addressed her life, her needs, her sense of loneliness, and detachment. She said a prayer during prayer time. She was struck by one thing the minister said. “God is always there.” That thought stuck in her mind. Timmy grew restless near the end of the service to bring her back to reality. After the final prayer and benediction people gravitated towards their friends. The atmosphere changed. She overheard her neighbors greeting their friend, “Jack, how’re you? You going to see the Braves and Phillies next Saturday?” Only one woman extended her hand, “Hi, I’m Rose. I am glad you came.” Sylvia noticed that Rose was looking over her shoulder to someone behind her. Sylvia started to say, “This is my first time, I am new here.” But Rose almost shouted, “Margaret, don’t get away. Wait, I have something to share with you.” With that she excused herself and whisked by Sylvia to join her friend. Sylvia took Timmy’s hand and headed for the door. One elderly woman spotted them at the door and said, “O do come again.” Sylvia thanked her and left less certain about church being what she needed.

Jesus said, *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me"*. When did he utter those words? Jesus had completed his healings. He had delivered his sermons and teachings. On grassy hillsides, by the seashore, from the bows of boats, in local synagogues, and in private homes he told his parables of the kingdom. Now, the shadow of the cross stretched across his path. Dark clouds loomed overhead. Jesus set his face like flint to face rejection and suffering ahead. Religious leaders hatched a plot to arrest Jesus secretly, eliminate him, and end this Jesus Movement. Soon his familiar friend, Judas, with a kiss of betrayal would kick the stone that started the avalanche and all hell broke loose and came crashing down on Jesus' head.

Jesus reserved one last parable. He painted a word picture on the canvas of the people's minds. It was a picture of the judgment, the end. Jesus with broad brush strokes depicting the judgment of the nations. In the Greek language Jesus said the nations or the Gentiles. It is the same word *eqnh*, the ones to whom he would send his followers to make disciples of all the *eqnh*.

In this picture Jesus panned the horizon and saw all the nations gathered before the Son of Man like the herds and flocks coming home to their shepherd. However, the shepherd is the King, the King of the universe, come in all his glory and the Holy angels with him. The king separates the gentiles as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats.

The parable of the sheep and goats speaks of inclusion and exclusion, of separation. I became fascinated with the basis of that separation. The King said to those on his right hand, *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

Of course these words confused the righteous, the good people. They denied that they had done these things. To their knowledge they had never seen their Lord hungry, or thirsty, destitute in need of clothes and shelter. Surely they would have fed him. "When did this happen to you, Lord?" The King of the universe assured them, *'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

The same holds true for those who failed to practice hospitality towards their Lord. They would have helped if they knew he was in such destitution. They protested, "That is terrible! When did we see you in those awful conditions? We would have done something. Again the king of the universe answered, *'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

It is a disconcerting thought, but it appears that the King based the criteria for judgment on the way the peoples of the nations treated the destitute, the strangers, and prisoners. God based the judgment on how these gentiles treated the marginalized, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the strangers, and the imprisoned.

Now I can't resolve all the complexities of this view. It was not what I was taught, that salvation is a simple thing of accepting Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior, saying a sinner's prayer, and then I'd go to heaven when I die. In the church in which I was reared, going to heaven was the end all of salvation. That was the version of the gospel presented to me as a child. So words like these press me to dig deeper, to question. Have I somehow received a reduced the Gospel of Jesus? Has the version of the Gospel I bought into been somehow truncated, trimmed down to right beliefs or right personal experience? This parable gives me great pause for these are the words, at least reputed to come right from the mouth of Jesus.

Jesus specifically stated that how we welcome visitors is how we welcome him. *I was a stranger and you took me in.* This is a consistent teaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Bear with me in a little Bible survey to examine this interesting idea. *"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes someone known to be a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes someone known to be righteous will receive a righteous person's reward.*

And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded." **Matthew 10:40-45** Can Jesus mean that? Is that true? In another place the writer states, *Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.* **Matthew 18:4-6.** This is a consistent idea in Matthew's Gospel with our text from Matthew 25. *"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'* **Matthew 25:40** Several of these verses have their parallels in Mark and Luke.

It appears that Jesus asserts his solidarity with the little ones, children, the destitute, the prisoners, and strangers. It is a most remarkable teaching of Jesus, that whoever treats someone with kindness, welcomes a child, welcomes a good man, a traveling preacher, or even the poor, the destitute, strangers, even prisoners will themselves be treated as disciples of Jesus. Even a small act of kindness like offering a cup of cold water will not go unnoticed and unrewarded in God's kingdom. I can't get my mind around that. It violates the Gospel as it was presented to me. Yet it is there in black and white. Jesus indicated that how someone treats another person indicates of how they treat *him*. According to Jesus, the king of the universe comes to us incognito, disguised as the poor, the destitute, the hungry, in rags, languishing in prison. "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these you did it to me."

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus applies these words specifically to the way we treat children, prophets, good people, the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, those needing clothing, the sick, and those in prison. *In fact, judgment, as expounded by Jesus, focuses on the practice of hospitality.* He mentioned no doctrinal test (Hey, what about the Trinity? What about the atonement?) There was no question of church membership or confession of faith. There was no demand that we show our certificates of baptism. No, just 'how did you treat your fellow human being?' The answer to that

question indicates your attitude towards Christ. Now I realize that this may not fit some of our theology about how God will judge. Yet, Jesus seems to move us from a focus away from right beliefs, or right experiences. He states that the judgment takes into account behavior, especially how we practice compassion and hospitality .

Now this doesn't negate that we come to faith in Jesus. I believe in Jesus. I have confessed my loyalty to him many times over. I trust in his promise to forgive my sins, all of them. I believe that in doing so I stand in his grace, his favor. Yet, Jesus nowhere stated that merely calling him "Lord, Lord" in itself means I have embraced God's way, God's path of compassion. God's path is the way of the cross, the way of the Poor Man of Nazareth. It is the way of compassionate love. Jesus did not say that we should merely adjust our thinking and hold a set of correct beliefs. He summoned us to *follow* him. To believe in him, biblically understood, is to obey him. *"Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching."* John 14: 23-24 It is to learn of him and to listen to his teachings and put them into practice. Those who hear his teachings and do not put them into practice are like the man who built his house on the sand. Those who hear his teachings and put them into practice are like a man who built his house on a solid foundation.

Jesus identified with the marginalized who needed compassionate care. God wants us to practice hospitality. The purpose of salvation is to create a people "zealous to do good deeds". *He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds.* (Titus 2:14)

The end of Salvation is not about going to heaven after you die. It is about bringing a taste of heaven to earth in the here and now, to become the beloved community that pleases God in the here and now with the promise that there is even more life to come.

Jesus strongly advocated the practice of hospitality. *Hospitality is compassion in action.* Notice those whom Jesus considers his brothers and sisters: The poor hungry, sick, strangers and imprisoned. Opportunities abound. These things we CAN do. God has not made the way impossible. Correct doctrines are important. Good experiences are nice. Yet the picture of judgment Jesus presents us focuses our attention to compassionate action, hospitality, care extended.

Jesus teaches that as whatever we do to one of these little ones, we do to him. So, where can we find Jesus today?

Perhaps Jesus is in a busy house cleaner or a harried waitress in the Golden Dawn Diner down the street. Perhaps Jesus is there in someone who comes to the food pantry to pick up a bag of groceries, or someone who picks out some clothes you donated to the Sisterhood. Maybe Jesus is in a little Cambodian girl you help support with m monthly contributions. Maybe Jesus is a little boy

in India whom you assisted to get his teeth cleaned and checked through a dental mission. Maybe Jesus is an old woman struggling to get off the bus with her little shopping cart. Maybe he sat across from you in the train this past week. Or maybe Jesus is in Sylvia pulling little Timmy behind her to church with an ache in her heart.