

In these last weeks of our lectionary cycle, we've been listening to Jesus give his disciples some farewell instructions before he faces his death. He's been telling them to be prepared for his return ~ an event that they should expect, but that may come suddenly ... or may be delayed. And so in this unit of Matthew's Gospel, he instructs them as to how to live *in the meantime*.

(1) Jesus encourages us to learn a lesson from the foolish bridesmaids: be wise, be watchful, and be ready. (2) And during this "meantime," don't just sit around waiting: use the gifts God has given you. Like bold and enterprising stewards, take a chance so that your gifts can multiply for the sake of the reign of God.

Our passage this week, a familiar one to many of us, gets down to the bottom line, to a word that makes some of us uncomfortable: *judgment*. Despite that discomfort, or perhaps because of it, we might explore the idea of holy judgment.

Perhaps our discomfort is because religion and judgment have been so unhappily conjoined for so long. It seems it was an unhappy dynamic long before Jesus: he had a lot to say about our judging one another.

I think I wrestle with this because I hold a deep, foundational belief in the goodness and grace of God, and the way Jesus speaks of judgement here feels jarring to that trust. This passage leaves me ill-at-ease with its bluntness and I don't want to dwell on it all that much.

However, perhaps in order to properly marinate in this passage and not skip over to the more overtly joyous bits, we ought to review the basics: God calls each and every one of us to participate in the unfolding reign of God, and we have free will to choose to do so or not. That said, if we do choose to actively participate, that freedom comes with responsibility. Such freedom brings joy, but the responsibility

necessitates serious, shared reflection on God's call and claim on our lives.¹

The freedom we experience in relationship with God allows us to choose whether or not we participate in and engage with community ... or do nothing. We can choose to answer God's call in our lives with intentionality, or we can passively ride the waves of our experiences. We can choose to allow God to shape our understanding of ourselves and one another, or we can rely on a humanistic self-understanding and ego-centered way of interacting in the world.

Our Christian responsibility comes with the understanding that we are loved, **and so is everyone else**. It's the understanding that my life isn't all about me, and your life isn't all about you. We have a responsibility *to* one another and *for* one another.

Of course we can choose not to answer God's call, ignore the blessings that others want to share with us, and hoard the blessings that we could share with others. And that's a choice. That choice gets to the heart of what the "goats" in this story did, in response to God's call: nothing. They weren't "sinners" in the conventional sense of doing bad things (Jesus didn't portray them as wolves, after all.) They just didn't do anything at all.

Let's back up a second: Jesus has described an apocalyptic scene: a huge, dramatic event with all the nations, all the angels, and the Son of Man coming in glory and sitting on a majestic throne. However, in the telling of this scene, he draws our focus not up at all this glory, but down here, at our level: he noticed people ~ in their hurt, in their hunger, in their loneliness, in their fear ... and he responded.

Jesus was a good and faithful Jew, who observed the tradition and laws of his faith which provided for the care of those who were suffering or in need.

¹ Kate Huey helped with the wording of this. Thanks, Kate!

And to follow Jesus is to also adhere to this same spiritual practice: loving our neighbors as ourselves and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Which then begs the question: whom do we push (or allow to be pushed) to the margins of our shared life, assigning them by default a place of deprivation when it comes to education, safety, food and shelter, health care, and security ~ those things that we might call the "goods" of life?

If we have enough (or more than enough) of these goods, are we noticing those who do not? Are we putting our energy and attention toward righting this imbalance? Are we using whatever advantage we have (in wealth, in voice, in social capital) to advance the wellbeing of others without those advantages?

Today's reading makes it clear what Jesus thinks about these questions, and what he expects our answers to be.

It's interesting that neither the sheep nor the goats saw Jesus in the suffering and those in need. The sheep responded to Jesus in a way that indicates that they understand what discipleship really means: they clothed the naked and fed the hungry and visited the lonely because that's what you do, not because they expect some sort of reward for doing so. The goats? Not so much. "If only we'd known!" they lament.

On Judgment Day, Jesus tells us, salvation belongs not automatically to those who have faith, but rather to those who are faithful ~ who live their 'freedom with responsibility.'

Still, as much as Judgment Day strikes a measure of fear in our hearts, "God does not see the story of our lives as we see the story of our lives. God sees as God sees. This becomes our saving grace."² In this "meantime," are we living as disciples of Jesus?

Be wise, be watchful, and be ready, Jesus told us. And during this "meantime," don't just sit around waiting: use the gifts God has given you, like bold and enterprising stewards. Take a chance so that your gifts

² *The Stewardship Companion: Lectionary Resources for Preaching*

can multiply for the sake of the reign of God. Look around and pay attention. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the lonely. Truly, just as you do it for someone Jesus loves, you do it for Jesus.