

Narrative Lectionary: Last Judgment
(or, As You Do It To the Least, You Do It To Me!)
April 7, 2019

Would you please say the second article of the Apostles' Creed with me: "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

He will come to judge the living and the dead. There will be judgment....

We see judgment happen on television all the time, don't we? Some of the most watched shows on television are the ones where there is judgment. People make it through to the next round, or they don't. There is a panel of judges that decides how good your performance was. Some of the judges aren't very nice.

So when we think about the end of this life; when we think of the end of history as we know it, it makes sense that there would be judgment. There *needs* to be judgment. Hitler needs to be judged. Pol Pot, the Cambodian dictator in the 1970s, who killed 1.5-3 million of his eight million people, needs to be judged. Joseph Stalin, who murdered 20 million people, needs to be judged. The mass murderers who walk into our schools with weapons and slaughter our students need to be judged, in this world and the next.

But the creed doesn't just say only the notoriously evil people will be judged. Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. Sounds like everybody will be judged. And we say, Well, I haven't been so bad. Come on, my sins are minor compared to...God will ask each of us to give an account of our lives. The question is, What will we say? What can we claim on that day of judgment?

This Gospel text from Matthew 25 drives us to deal with judgment this morning. And I am going to suggest to you that there will be different judgments for different people. I'm not making this up. We find this in Scripture. In St. Paul's writings we find three ways that God will judge people; three ways in which people will pass through judgment safely to the other side.

One way is through baptism, when we receive this free gift of a new relationship with God in Christ. One way to be ready for that final judgment is to confess the name of Jesus. Paul writes to the believers in Rome- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Classic Christian doctrine has said that those who are baptized into Christ are a part of the death and resurrection of Christ. Our sins are forgiven because of Christ’s work on the cross, and our eternal presence with God is secure. That’s the first way a group of people will pass safely through judgment. They are covered under what Christ did on the cross. They receive the grace of God by faith.

But then somebody asks, Well, what about those who never heard of Jesus? They’ve never heard of the cross. It’s not fair if they aren’t given some kind of chance, right? So Paul has another way that folks can pass through judgment safely to the other side.

This is what he calls the unwritten law. In Romans 2, Paul says that people who have never heard about Jesus have a law written on their heart, and that at the judgment, “their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” (Romans 2:15b-16) Paul says, Some will be judged according to whether or not they followed God’s law written on their hearts. Did they follow their conscience.

Here is a third way some folks will pass safely through judgment. Paul talks about the Jewish people in Romans 9-11. He says the Jewish people have a covenant with God that will not be broken. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, Paul says (Romans 11:29) The Jewish people will pass safely through judgment because God chose them.

So what about this judgment in Matthew 25? I believe this one has to do with those who never heard of Jesus, or folks from other religions, or

atheists, or agnostics. Matthew says, at this judgment, All the *nations* will be gathered around him...”

The Greek word for nations here is Gentiles. This is a judgment, not for Christians, not for Jews, but for everybody else: Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, people of no particular faith, all these folks gathered before the throne.

And the judgment will involve separation. Jesus says: The Son of Man will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. People will be separated like a Palestinian shepherd would separate sheep and goats into separate shelters at night. And we wonder why are goats considered evil, and sheep considered good? One theory I heard is that goat hair was darker, and was used for sackcloth, for mourning, or for repentance. And sheep’s wool was white and was a sign of prosperity. And the left side was seen as the unlucky side. So it was goats to the left side.

And here’s how Jesus will separate people one from another. “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... (now help me out here)

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*, 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.*”

“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? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.” How does the king decide who will be let into eternal life with God and who will be sent away? *On the basis of how they took care of those in need.* Not according to their beliefs. In fact, Matthew calls these people who do good works *righteous*. Remember, these are people of other religions or no religion at all. They are considered righteous according to how they treated those in need. And these are little ministries of food and shelter and clothing and visitation, that anybody can do, anybody can be supportive of.

Now we Lutherans say: This looks like a theology of good works! Yep, this particular judgment seems to be based on the good works of love. What does Paul say at the end of 1 Corinthians 13: Now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Greater than faith, Paul says. Love is the bottom line.

These are people who don't name the name of Jesus, but they live and they love as if they follow him. Paul says in Galatians 6:7 and following: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you sow whatever you reap. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary of doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

Paul says, We will reap what we sow. These people at the final judgment are reaping what they sowed. They didn't name the name of Jesus, but they planted seeds of love and mercy as if they followed Jesus. And they will reap mercy at the final judgment.

According to Matthew, these people are receiving Christ, although they don't see it that way. When you did it to the least significant of these, you did it to *me*. Jesus says, *I* was hidden in the life of that person. When you accepted those people who have been marginalized by the world, when you fed or clothed folks or visited them in prison, *you were accepting me, you were clothing me, you were visiting me!* These people who didn't confess Christ didn't know it, but in their lifestyle of service, they accepted Christ who was hidden in the lives of those they were serving. God counts it as righteousness.

Now that's a very wide view of God's grace, but I believe that Scripture pushes the door open even wider. You've heard me declare this before: I believe that on the cross Christ offers salvation for the whole world, for all of creation (see John 12:32). What are the words of institution when I consecrate the cup? This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you *and for all people* for the forgiveness of sin. *All people* are forgiven in Christ's death on the cross. Not everybody realizes it yet.

Richard Rohr has written a new book called *The Universal Christ*, and he says that because all people are made in the image of God, that Christ, the Word made flesh, is in all people. Listen to this quote: "Through the act of creation, God manifested the eternally outflowing Divine Presence into the

physical and material world. Ordinary matter is the hiding place for Spirit, and thus the very Body of God. Honestly what else could it be, if we believe- as Orthodox Jews, Christians and Muslims do- that “one God created all things”? When Paul wrote, “There is only Christ. He is everything and he is in everything” (Colossians 3:11) was he a naive pantheist, or did he really understand the full implication of the Gospel of Incarnation?”

St. Paul seems says that Christ. God’s Word, is in *all* of creation, because creation is the Word made flesh. Christ is in each person. It’s just that in some people Christ is not fully arisen yet. Christ is in the grave within them. They aren’t experiencing life in Christ yet. Our opportunity is to invite folks into a relationship with that Christ who is already within them.

I am grateful that at the end of time, it is Jesus who is the Judge. Jesus is the one who said from the cross, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. And if Jesus decides to be merciful in this way, who are we to judge?

What about the folks in this parable who are sent away to where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth? William Barclay, the Scottish theologian, has a wonderful insight into this parable. He says that we misunderstand what kind of punishment is going on here for the goats on the left. The Greek word used for punishment is *kolasis*, which literally means pruning, as you prune a tree so that it will bear more fruit. It’s only used in Greek literature for *remedial* punishment. This is punishment that makes us better, not punishment that is simply punitive.

And the Greek word for eternal here is the word *aionios*, which is only used for God. Only God is eternal, from beginning to end. So eternal punishment literally means the kind of pruning that only God can give. Maybe what this punishment of goats does is to prune them of those things that caused them not to bear fruit. To use another image, it might be that God will treat these folks on his left side as if God is a jeweler burning away all the dross, all the impurities in them, so that they can shine like the sun. This is remedial punishment, not punishment that goes on and on.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy: This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge

of the truth (I Timothy 2:3-4). If God desires everyone to eventually be saved, does God get what God wants?

And in the end, God seems to be about unification, not separation. Paul says in Ephesians 1: 10- “With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to *gather up all things in him*, things in heaven and things on earth.” It is God’s plan to eventually bring everything together in the fullness of time. That’s not separation; that’s unification. That’s why I don’t believe this parable is the end of things. This is a part of the process of God bringing all things together.

As I heard someone say, If Jesus is all about teaching me to love my enemies, won’t he figure out how to love his enemies at the end of time? Amen.