

**A DRAMATIC PARABLE
(AND MY TROUBLED HISTORY WITH IT)**

Matthew 25:31-46

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on Christ the King Sunday, November 23, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Focus Text

‘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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And 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 who are members of my family, you did it to me.” 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.” 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?” 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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

As I have shared in recent weeks in adult education, I have been nurtured in narrative preaching and am drawn to the narrative portions of the Bible, particularly the stories of the Old Testament and the parables of Jesus.

Today’s passage is one of the most dramatic parables in the New Testament, but unlike so many others among Jesus’ parables, this is one with which I have a troubled history.

In the first part of this sermon I want to share both the drama of the parable and my trouble with it; in the second part, I want to offer a way that I have sought to resolve the trouble for myself. I hope that you benefit from the drama, the trouble, and my attempted resolution.

Let us pray. *“Lord, silence within us any voices of doubt, distraction, or depression, that we might hear your Word spoken through my words, and that as a result, we might be and do out of our relationship with you. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.”*

I.

Most parables start with something on earth

- A mustard seed¹
- Buried treasure²
- A son leaving home.³

They then end with something that transcends the ordinary:

- The greatest of shrubs
- The sale of all possessions to purchase the field in which treasure is found
- A prodigal welcomed home with music and dancing.

¹ Matthew 13:31-32.

² Matthew 13:34.

³ Luke 15:11-32.

The parable we have read today reverses this order. It begins in a realm beyond the ordinary:

- The apocalyptic figure of the “Son of Man”
- Coming at the end of time “in glory”
- Seated on a throne
- Surrounded by angels
- Nations gathering before him
- Separating them left from right
- Blessing those on his right and inviting them to inherit the kingdom prepared for them
- Cursing those on his left and commanding them to eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

It ends with ordinary activities on earth:

- Feeding the hungry
- Providing drink for the thirsty
- Welcoming the stranger
- Clothing the naked
- Visiting the sick or incarcerated.

II.

A definition of a parable I learned in Sunday School is “an earthly story with a heavenly message.” By contrast, this parable is a “heavenly story with earthly message.” The problem I have with it is that the story is “heavenly” only to a point. Allow me to elaborate on my troubled history with this dramatic parable.

(a)

First, this parable appears to promise entrance into the kingdom of heaven based solely on behavior:

- Feeding the hungry
- Providing drink for the thirsty
- Welcoming the stranger
- Clothing the naked
- Visiting the sick and the incarcerated.

It appears from this parable that if we do these five things, we enter the kingdom of heaven.

As such, this parable is theologically shallow and leaves out some grand themes of the Christian faith.

- There is nothing in this parable about the grace of God.
- There is nothing in this parable about forgiveness.
- There is nothing in this parable about repentance.
- There is nothing in this parable about belief.
- There is nothing in this parable about worship.
- There is nothing in this parable about learning.
- There is nothing in this parable about fellowship within the community of the church.

This parable is all about what we do. It displays a “works righteousness” that makes our forebears in the Protestant Reformation spin in their graves.

(b)

Second, it appears from this parable that if we fail to do these five things, we are cast into “eternal punishment,” into “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

The parable implies that not even service to God in any way other than these five will reverse the decision on the part of Christ – the Son of Man returning in glory – to cast us into the fires of hell.

(c)

Third, because of this dramatic emphasis on heaven and hell, the only way I can conceive of this parable motivating anyone is through fear:

- Fear that God might actually punish us for our failure
- Fear that that punishment might actually be for eternity
- Fear that all those spiritually and psychologically damaging images we have of God as a harsh judge, as a custodian of wrath, as an angry old man, are in fact true.

By now you surely know me well enough to know that a parable that ties our eternal fate to our works, our deeds, our accomplishments on earth – no matter how noble they are – is not going to set well with me.

A parable whose final image is of a God who sentences some or all of his audience to active and consuming fires of hell is not a parable that is going to get up in the morning and draw me to the keyboard to write a sermon to share with my congregation or its children.

I have a troubled history with this parable, trouble for which I do not apologize.

II.

Thank you for letting me vent.

Now, is there anything good that comes out of this parable? “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

I think there is.

(a)

First, there is the moral claim of Jesus Christ on our efforts to take care of the most vulnerable people in our society. We do not need a judgmental parable depicting some of us as “sinners in the hands of an angry God” in order to hear the call of Christ to care for the least, the last, and the lost.

- Christ’s moral claim is rooted in the continual Old Testament call to take care of the widow and the orphan.⁴
- It is rooted in Jewish customs of hospitality to the stranger and inclusion of the resident alien among the household.⁵
- It arises out of the canonization in the Old Testament of laws of Sabbath and Year of Jubilee, the first in which the land shall have rest and the second in which the indentured shall be set free.⁶
- It is consistent with the prophecies of Isaiah⁷, Amos⁸, and Micah⁹; the Wisdom of Solomon¹⁰; the righteousness of Boaz toward Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi¹¹; and David’s order that the crippled feet of Mephibosheth, the son of his vanquished opponent Saul, take their place under the King’s table every night at mealtime.¹²
- Christ’ moral claim on us radiates from the two Great Commandments in Israel’s history – combined and affirmed by Christ himself – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹³
- We see it in the deeds of Jesus¹⁴ and his disciples¹⁵, as they heal the sick, cleanse the leper, turn barley loaves and fish into food to feed five-thousand¹⁶.
- It clangs with the coin of the widow’s mite.¹⁷
- It spreads out among the people of God as the early apostles sell their land and their goods, pool their resources, create a church in which “there was not a needy person among them.”¹⁸

⁴ Exodus 22:21-24.

⁵ Exodus 23:9.

⁶ See Leviticus 25 and Exodus 21:2-6 and Deuteronomy 13:12-18.

⁷ Isaiah 33:15-16.

⁸ Amos 5:14-15.

⁹ Micah 6:8.

¹⁰ Proverbs 11:4.

¹¹ Ruth 2:15-16.

¹² II Samuel 9:1-13.

¹³ Matthew 22:34-40, drawing on Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

¹⁴ Matthew 4:23-25.

¹⁵ Matthew 10:5-15.

¹⁶ Matthew 14:13-21.

¹⁷ Luke 21:1-4.

- It radiates from nearly every page of scripture.
- We do not need a threat of eternal damnation to hear Christ's moral claim that we care for the least, the last, and the lost.

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To the best of our ability, we will answer this moral call at Westminster, even as we move into the most uncertain economic times in our nation in over nearly eighty years.

- We will answer this call as we determine household by household what we will contribute financially to Westminster in 2009, doing our best, whether that is twice what we have given in 2008, the same, or less than half as much.
- We will answer this call by participating in the Alternative Christmas Market the two Sundays after Thanksgiving – to meet or exceed the \$40,000+ we have raised the last two years all of which goes directly, in the name of this church, to the most vulnerable people in our city, our region, our world.
- We will answer this call by what we do in our mission funding and our mission volunteering in and through Westminster, and beyond Westminster in ways few at Westminster see or know.
- And we will answer this call by working in the public and private sectors of the nation we love to make sure that even in the toughest of times, we shrink not back from our nation's heritage consistent with Christ's call:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I will lift my lamp beside the golden door.¹⁹*

(b)

Second, I have come to believe that in this parable, while wrath and judgment appear at the end, they are not the final word.

Even as Jesus tells this parable about the coming of the Son of Man in judgment, even as its *modus operandi* is one of fear, there is something deep within the parable barely seen, like a gleaming, white pearl buried in an oyster.

That something is this: the people who are feeding and providing water and clothing and visiting and welcoming are doing so as part of their "second nature," nonchalantly, innocently, unselfconsciously. Doing these is as much a part of who they are as breathing. They never think about it. It never occurs to them not to do these things.

From a literary standpoint, the judgementalism at the end of the parable does not have to be the major movement in the parable. Rather, the quiet, unselfconscious service hidden in the middle of a parable is the key. It is like a bloop single that in the fifth inning turns out to be the winning run no one realizes at the time.

This pearl, this bloop single, is what makes the positive action happen in the parable. It de-fangs the judgementalism. It reminds us that when we act out of fear, we do not act out of our true nature.

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Just as this parable is the end of Jesus' teaching in this gospel, at the beginning of his teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said:

The eye is the lamp of the body.
So if your eye is healthy,
Your whole body will be full of light²⁰?

¹⁸ Acts 4:32-37/

¹⁹ Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," found in *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, edited by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.) Available at <http://www.bartleby.com/59/6/givemeyourti.html>.

²⁰ Matthew 6:22.

This is Jesus' way of saying:

“What you see is what you become.
What you see in me is who you can come to be.”

If we see Jesus as *glory*,
Then we'll share our bread,
All of it.

If, on the other hand,
We see Jesus as *judgment*,
We'll share our bread as well,
But only as much
As we think it takes
To avoid wrath,
To placate him or others.

“The eye is the lamp of the body.”
If we will look on his light, his glory,
Our eyes will be healthy,
Our whole bodies will be filled with light,
We will share what is needed,
And more.

Amen.