

**NARCOTICS CANNOT STILL THE TOOTH
THAT NIBBLES AT THE SOUL –
Matthew 25:31-46**

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on November 20, 2011, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, on Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday.

Focus Passage

‘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.’

I selected the title for this sermon – “Much Gesture, from the Pulpit” – months ago. This title was never intended to be a description of my preaching style, but all week long the sermon has been running away from the title, so yesterday I abandoned the title altogether.

The new title, which comes from the same poem I will reveal later, is “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth//That nibbles at the soul.”

Let us pray: “Still us, Lord; still us, and as my words begin to break the silence, may they become your words that take us into even deeper silence. Amen.”

There is unease in our land that in some ways hits closer to home

- Than whether or not the Committee of Twelve will reach a deal by Wednesday
- Than whether financial restructure of Italy and Greece will spare the world economy further turmoil
- Perhaps even than whether or not the economy will pick up soon enough and sufficiently enough for us to find meaningful employment or security in retirement.

The unease that has crept into our nation’s consciousness the past two weeks has come from the most popular of our diversions – college football – and from a place ironically known as “Happy Valley.”

The news out of Penn State has come with sufficient detail to tap within most of us a natural human sympathy for the vulnerable as they are preyed upon by the powerful. In addition, these events tap within us a deep human revulsion toward those who do such preying, a questioning toward those who have the power to intervene but fail to do so, and a disappointment toward those who have the responsibility to respond but do so timidly.

Whether we are an avid sports fan or have no reason to program ESPN as a favorite on our cable remote, we are as human beings troubled. The new sermon title comes from Emily Dickinson and describes our troubled-ness:

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth –
That nibbles at the soul –¹

The events at Penn State nibble at our soul.

I.

Toward the end of Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of Matthew, seated – as he was at the beginning – on a mountain,² Jesus teaches his disciples privately what it will be like when the end of the age comes.

- He tells three straight parables, one of which ends with a door being shut³ and two of which end with those who are unfaithful “weeping and gnashing” their teeth.⁴
- He then describes, in parable-like fashion, a figure whom he alternately refers to as “Son of Man,” “King,” “Son of the Father,” and “Lord,” a figure that both he and his disciples know refers to himself as the Messiah.⁵

Jesus says:

‘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

¹ Emily Dickinson, “This world is not conclusion,” written in 1862, first published in 1896, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Little, Brown, and Company, 1955), #501, p. 243, found in Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Re-hearing the Gospel as News* (London: T & T Clark International, 2010), 9.

² See Matthew 5:1 where Jesus begins his ministry and Matthew 24:3 where he begins this final teaching before turning toward Jerusalem.

³ Matthew 25:1-13.

⁴ Matthew 24:45-51 and Matthew 25:14-30.

⁵ The title “Son of Man” comes from Daniel 7:13-14.

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.

In a positive vein Jesus points to a human sympathy that nearly all of us feel for people who are vulnerable. That is why even events on a football team – albeit a good one – on a college campus “[Nibble] at the soul.” We feel sympathy for the vulnerable, and we want to do something.

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Likewise, in Jesus’ parable-like teaching, the absence of such sympathy, or at least the absence of a response, leads us to anger, sadness and judgment:

...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...

When the vulnerable are ignored, as it appears they were at Penn State, “the Tooth//Nibbles at the soul.”

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In addition, in this parable-like story, sympathy or its absence, response or lack of response, bear enormous implications.

Jesus boldly asserts that in our natural sympathy and the response that follows, we are responding to *his very presence* in the world and we *experience* that presence first-hand:

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

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.

Likewise, the absence of sympathy or response to a vulnerable human being is an absence of response to God:

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.

What Jesus is saying is that at the end of time, upon his return, it is our natural, human sympathy for and action on behalf of the vulnerable that more than anything else determines whether or not we belong to Christ. It is not intensity of belief nor degree of faith, it is not correctness of creed nor style of worship that ultimately matter. It is whether or not we act out of our natural sympathy for those who are vulnerable:

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.

II.

There are several theological issues I have raised so far which I want to explore a bit deeper. So follow me along.

(a)

First, on the most raw and primeval level, Jesus may be saying that we are closest to God when we experience our natural sympathy for those who are vulnerable and when we act out of that sympathy.

- Jesus implies that such sympathy is crucial to who we are as creatures made in God's image. *"Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."*
- He implies that such sympathy is perhaps the most important aspect of what it means to be human.
- He implies that such sympathy is present and available in virtually every human being.
- He implies that when we act from such sympathy, our actions are free and natural, reflecting who we truly are. *"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?"*
- In addition, Christ makes the bold claim that when we act out of our natural human sympathy, we are not only responding to the vulnerable, but we are responding directly to Christ himself, and acting directly upon Christ himself.
- In other words, when we express natural sympathy for the vulnerable, we experience the presence of God as directly as we ever experience it in this world.

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There is much that is appealing about this.

- Since our natural human sympathy is universal, we share it every human being, regardless of race, religion, ethnic or gender identity.
- It unites us with others.
- When we experience and act out of our human sympathy for the weak and vulnerable, we clear away clutter that separates us from other human beings.
 - For example, when we stop to help a fallen stranger on the sidewalk, or work together in Haiti following natural disasters, we are united with others in our sympathy.
 - Whatever differences we might have with our fellow pedestrians or relief workers fall to the wayside behind the sympathy that unites us.

All this is appealing in Jesus' parable-like teaching.

(b)

But there is a challenge to his teaching as well.

The challenge lies in the words of judgment that appear when we fail to act out of our sympathy.

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.

If we lack this sympathy, or, if, more commonly, we fail to act out of it, Jesus implies both that we are *blocked* from God and that that blockage is *eternal*.

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It will not surprise you when I say that I have trouble with passages of judgment, particularly when judgment appears to be eternal and irrevocable.

“Is door closed forever,” we ask. “Is the silence and absence from God permanent?”

I will not presume to speak for God on this question, but I will say a word about the text, the parable-like story Jesus tells.

I do not believe that Christ – or anyone else for that matter – would tell a story that ends in judgment if he believed it was too late for hearers to change.

- I believe Christ weaves this story for his disciples and subsequently for us to encourage us to listen to our natural human sympathy and act on it.
- Why would Jesus tell such a story if he thought it was too late for anyone who heard it to act?

Therefore, I question whether the judgment at the end of this story is final and irreversible.

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Second, this story concerns “*all the nations.*” This phrase means “every human being.”

A few chapters later, after his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus’ closing words to these same disciples – once again on a mountain – likewise concern “*all nations*”:

Go therefore [he says] and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.⁶

The judgment of *all the nations* in our parable-like story is followed by a commission to “make disciples” of *all nations* and to “baptize” them.

It seems to me that in his final words of commission, Jesus is more than leaving the door open for any human being – and every human being – to hear his call, to listen to our natural human sympathy, to act on it, and to experience his presence when we do.

I do not believe the door is permanently shut; the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the final sound; the judgment, irreversible.

III.

What has happened at Penn State is but one example that draws from us our natural sympathy for the vulnerable and raises issues of response and non-response on the part of others and on the part of ourselves.

While it is a horrible incident filled with direct pain for some and public tragedy for others, in a week in which this text is read in churches around the world, the events at Penn State may have may have the salutary effect of reminding us

- That sympathy we feel for anyone who is vulnerable is a gift from God
- And the response we make from that sympathy is a matter of our souls and fate.

⁶ Matthew 28:16-20.

The sympathy we feel, the sadness and revulsion we know, are the only “narcotic” able to “still the tooth that nibbles at the soul.”

That “narcotic” is given us at creation by God, restored to us in redemption by Jesus Christ, prescribed for health and healing by the One who truly stills our soul.