

Matthew 25: 31-46

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Christ Church

I guess that when long ago people first heard this passage from Matthew's gospel way back when it was first written, probably between 80 and 90 AD, it would have caused them to take a hard look at the way they were living - because the writer wrote some good news and some bad news.

The good news was that if they were living their lives in caring and helpful ways to others who were having hard times and really needed help, then, when the end came and Jesus came back, the people who helped would be called the righteous ones and they would inherit eternal life.

But the bad news was that the people who didn't live their lives helping others would be cursed - and they would be cursed by Jesus when he came back, and they would be doomed to eternal fiery punishment.

Hard words.....and the surprise for the first hearers of those words , was that this wasn't ultimately about what they had done or not done for people, but that those people were actually, somehow, in some way, Jesus himself.

And so, Jesus, who was portrayed here as a king on a throne, was going to separate people into two groups in the way that a shepherd separated sheep and goats for the night. But in this reading, Jesus isn't the Good Shepherd caring for and protecting his sheep. Jesus is a king on a throne passing final and eternal judgment.

We need to remember that there are many other ways that Jesus is called a king - a caring and good and loving king...but here he is a king who is a powerful judge who determines which people will deserve eternal life, and which people will go to eternal fiery punishment.

All this was written for a particular group of people at a particular time in the early church, and it was meant, by the writer of Matthew's gospel, to send a particular message... We don't preach here about Jesus sending people to eternal punishment

Our children don't hear that message at Christ Church and they won't. Our children here know that God loves them no matter what...they hear about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and they learn how much Jesus loves them, and this message about eternal punishment is one that we need to carefully think about and pray about and carefully talk about with our children when and if they ever hear it and ask about it.

Because it's in the Bible and we can read commentaries explaining what it means and why it's in Matthew's gospel. But I'm not going to do an exegesis of this message tonight/today, and explain it...

I'm going to tell you a story instead. I thought about it as I read and re read and thought about this gospel reading all this week. Because there's a way that this story fits....

It happened a long time ago on a very hot Saturday afternoon as I was sitting in my air conditioned office in a church, in a far suburb of Chicago. I was putting the finishing touches on my sermon, and I was just about to take a break and eat my lunch that I'd brought from home, when all of a sudden I heard a loud banging on the front door of the church building where I was.

So I got up and looked out the window. The doors were all locked because I was alone, and lately I'd felt much safer if they were locked because we'd had a robbery a few weeks before and all of us were still a bit uneasy.

And there, standing outside the door, was a man, dirty and disheveled, and maybe drunk, He looked hot and tired, but I have to admit that my first thought was – because I was a bit scared – maybe he'll go away and think that nobody's here. But my car was right there in front and I suppose that's why he came to the door.

It surprised me that he was even here. This was a church in a pastoral setting in a very wealthy suburb. People said it reminded them of Northern Virginia, and very often as I'd be driving to church early on a Sunday morning, I'd pass men and women on horseback out in the rolling countryside – riding in the hunt – fox hunters - in their bright coats, and a pack of hounds baying... It was a very different world from the streets and skyscrapers of Chicago...and why would this man be here?

At first I thought that I wouldn't go to the door. It would make much more sense if I didn't. I was a woman alone in an empty church. I had my collar on but still....I was a woman alone, and all of us women understand well what that means.

Whatever made me go to the door, I don't know...actually, I do know... so I did. I know that I was praying as I walked to the door...but I opened it – just a crack – and even then I could feel the intense heat of that summer day.

And there he was. He didn't look up to see who had opened the door.....he just began to talk and he said, "My name's Eugene and I need a drink of water." He was sweating and he smelled bad and I was pretty sure he'd been drinking. He was carrying a huge black plastic garbage bag that looked like it was about half full of cans.

The drinking fountain was right down the hall, so I thought, well, I can send him there pretty quickly and if I need to, I can get right back in my office and lock the door. In the very little time that it took for me to decide what to do, Eugene very slowly raised his head and looked right into my eyes.

I know I had been expecting something else – I'm not sure what – but when he looked at me, something happened. He had beautiful eyes. They were full of sadness and anguish and pain, and I think, embarrassment too. And as I looked into his eyes I saw something that I still can't forget. I saw him....

I saw a person just as human as I was. I saw a man who was a little boy once...a man whose journey had brought him to the door of this church. And it was hot and he was tired and he had asked for a drink of water.

And right then I realized that just as his journey had brought him here, my journey had led me here too...and that I was standing in the doorway between this man and a drink of water. And I was very aware that I had some sort of power to either give him a drink or not give him a drink.....a drink of cold water on a hot day.

And so I asked him to come in and I showed him where the water fountain was down the hall and then he asked where the bathroom was, and I told him. And instead of going back into my office and locking the door, I stood outside the open front door by his garbage bag of cans. And it was really hot and there wasn't any kind of breeze.

In a few minutes, Eugene came back. I could tell that he'd washed his face and smoothed his hair and as he stepped outside in the heat, he thanked me very politely and he reached out and shook my hand, and he picked up his garbage bag and started to walk away. And I said, "Eugene...." And he stopped and he turned around and he said, "God bless you lady", and I said, "God bless you, Eugene...do you need anything else?" And he just looked at me with his beautiful eyes and shook his head no and walked away.

And I just stood there feeling both the hot summer sun and the cool air conditioning coming out the open door. And I didn't feel relieved that he was gone. I felt empty and sad and helpless and angry- because somehow I didn't do it right. Because somehow I should have done more for this man who was my brother. Who was, as Mother Theresa said...who was Jesus in his most distressing disguise.

And I watched Jesus walk down the road, slightly drunk, slightly dirty and disheveled, carrying a garbage bag half full of cans. And I walked back into my air conditioned office in that beautiful air conditioned church and there was my lunch sitting on my desk and I had never even thought to give it to him

And then I thought, well I can get in my car and go down the road and find him and give it to him., and I can even bring him more water. But maybe he would want to get in my car then, and ask me to take him somewhere, and I was afraid, and I didn't go.

Ministry is risky on all kinds of levels. I took a risk that day and there were some people who were very, very mad at me for letting Eugene come in. And I understood that. Helping others can sometimes be a risky business, but that's what Jesus calls us to do.

But any time we take a risk to do that, it usually can cost us something. Sometimes it's our security or our money or our time or our pride or our patience...and in this day and age, it can even be our life.

But I think that in the whole scheme of things, maybe it's riskier for us if we don't help others. And I'm not talking about eternal punishment here, if we don't .....

Jesus came to me on a hot summer day as I sat busy in my air conditioned office writing a sermon. And he knocked at the door and I didn't recognize him. And I was afraid of him. I opened the door and let him in, but I was afraid of him.

And when he left and as I watched him walk away with his bag of cans and his beautiful eyes, I was afraid for him, and I was afraid for me because I could have done more. I didn't even give him something to eat and I didn't go and find him because ministry can be risky business.

Richard Bach, who wrote that lovely little book, Jonathan Livingston Seagull wrote another book that has a sentence in it that I believe is a very great truth. One character says to the other as they're talking about judgment, "You know, I believe that when we cross over to whatever place it is that we cross over to when we die, that we're only going to be asked one question. Just one – nothing else. And that's, 'When you had the opportunity, did you show love? When you had the opportunity, did you show love...?'"

And I guess that's our question too, but I see it answered in countless ways here at Christ Church as we minister to others. We saw it in countless ways just last week, as over 350 people ministered to our Caritas guests when they came here for food and shelter and kindness and love....and they ministered to us in countless ways too...ways that sometimes even took us by surprise.

Jesus said, "Whatever you do for each other, you're really doing that for me..." Amen to that....