

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor
Compassion for 'The Least of These'
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46
November 26, 2017

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹"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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And 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.' ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.' ⁴⁴Then 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?' ⁴⁵Then 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.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

There’s a wonderful song that comes from Jackson Browne; it’s called “*The Rebel Jesus*.” It’s a biting source of contemporary social commentary.

The song begins with a Christmas scene, streets full of life and laughter and Christmas music. People gather to celebrate the season ... “*the birth of the rebel Jesus*,” Brown says.

Of course, the word “*rebel*” interrupts this peaceful holiday scene; the jarring intrusion is not accidental, and the tension it creates runs like a tight strand of barbed wire through the song.

Browne continues reflecting on happy Christians celebrating Christmas, singing about Jesus as Prince of Peace and Savior.

But all is not well, because these very people fill up his churches with pride and gold. Not only that, but they turn the temple of creation—mountains, streams, valleys, and fields (which are for Browne) God’s true sanctuary of worship—into a “robber’s den.” The arrogant pursuit of wealth and the careless plundering of creation, Browne knows, are the kinds of things “*the rebel Jesus*” would have spoken against strongly.

Browne can’t help being cynical even about holiday charity. The seasonal giving of gifts among relative’s contrasts with the “*locks and guns*” with which people guard their personal assets the rest of the year.

Browne allows that, during the Christmas season, people may indulge in a little holiday generosity for the poor among us. But he quickly adds that our charity only goes skin deep, because if we go farther than charity—to the realm of *justice*—and deal with the *systems* that make and keep poor people in poverty, *we will get “the same as the rebel Jesus.”*

One more thing about the song: Browne’s use of disturbing religious language, like “*heathen*” and “*pagan*,” is significant. He suggests that there is a kind of *economic orthodoxy* that may allow or even encourage us to throw some dollars toward the poor, but this orthodoxy commands us *never* to question the *systems* that create and reinforce poverty.

Anyone who interferes—anyone who refuses to accept the *locks and guns*, the *pride and gold*, the *meager generosity*, the *carelessness about the environment*, and the *obliviousness to economic justice for the poor*—will be banished from the inner circle of the *pious* and *respectable*, and “*will get the same as the rebel Jesus.*”¹

I share this with you because it’s much the same message that the Gospel writer, Matthew, shared with his community of mostly Jewish followers of Jesus (toward the end of the first century) in his story of the *judgment of the nations*.

The major point of the parable is: whatever is done “*for the least of these*” (the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, imprisoned) is done to Jesus.

¹ Brian D. McClaren, “*Everything Must Change*,” Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 2007, pp. 227, 228

In other words, the poor are to be treated with *compassion*. What one does to or for the poor is done to God.

You see, the crystallization of Jesus' message speaks of a way of life grounded in an *imitation of God*—what God is like (image) and how we are to live (ethics)—are brought together.

Moreover, for Jesus compassion was *not simply an individual virtue*, but a *sociopolitical paradigm* expressing his alternative vision of human life in community, a vision of life embodied in the movement that came into existence around him.

This is important to understand because in the biblical world (as in ours!) most people thought that the point religion was about being *holy*—or *pure*—or *sinless*: God is holy; therefore, Israel is to be holy.

This is called a *purity system*—and every culture has one. A purity system is a cultural map (or social system) organized around pure and impure, clean and unclean.

For example, in the time of Jesus, one's purity status depended to some extent on *birth*—Priests and Levites (both hereditary classes) come first, followed by "Israelites," followed by converts (Jewish persons who were not Jewish by birth), etc.

Purity also depended on *behavior*. Those who were carefully observant of the purity codes (Leviticus) were "the pure" of course. The worst of the nonobservant were "outcasts." They included occupational groups such as tax collectors and shepherds, and the worst of whom were "untouchables, sinners."

Physical wholeness also was associated with purity, and lack of wholeness with impurity. The maimed, the chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs, and so forth were on the impure side of the spectrum.

Purity was also associated with *economic class*. To be sure, being rich did not automatically put one on the pure side (wicked rich people were often spoken of), but being abjectly poor almost certainly made one impure. Popular wisdom, then as now, often saw wealth as a blessing from God and poverty as an indication that one had not lived right.

Purity was also associated with male and female—the natural bodily processes of childbirth and menstruation were considered sources of impurity, and these led to a more generalized sense of the impurity of women—and their status as distinctly second class people.

Finally, whether one was a Jew or Gentile—by definition all Gentiles were unclean—and Palestine was occupied territory, a colony of the Roman Empire, controlled by an impure and unclean Gentile oppressor.

To sum up, the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

But in the message and activity of Jesus (and the early church), we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.²

² Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1994, pp. 50, 51, 52, 53

Ask yourself: is compassion for the least of these-- the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, imprisoned--the public face of Christianity in the United States today?

Particularly in the predominately white churches? Are we promoting a politics of compassion for our society? Is that what we're known for?

I suspect that if you asked most people outside of the church today what they think of when they hear the word *Christian*, you're likely to get a description that looks a lot more like a purity system than the compassion of rabbi, Jesus.

The public airwaves—as well as the personal encounters people have with one another—are filled with religious people who are generous with judgment and stingy with grace; hardness and victim blaming is symptomatic of so much of religious life in America today.

John Pavlovitz, a pastor in Raleigh and formerly in Charlotte, (commenting on this reality) says in his wonderful new book, *"A Bigger Table:"*

"Our affinity-based faith communities can have the same effect on us today as the cloistered self-righteous religion of old (or today!). In the comfortable confines of people who agree with us and look like us and believe what we believe, we can rationalize the reasons for the suffering in the world and our reasons for not intervening: the poor are poor because they are lazy, addicts are addicted because they are weak, gay people are gay because they've chosen to reject God. Whatever pain they're going through is of their own design ...

'Our "*fend for yourself*," *pull yourself up by your own bootstraps*, "*every person for themselves*" version of Christianity is a far cry from the Jesus who washed feet, fed multitudes, healed wounds, and comforted grievors.'"³

Friends, the same interpretive struggle goes on in the church today—and in religion generally. In parts of the church there are groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way of life, and they draw their own sharp boundaries between the righteous and sinners. It's a sad irony that these groups, many of which are seeking very earnestly to be faithful to Scripture, end up emphasizing those parts of Scripture that Jesus himself challenged and opposed.

But an interpretation of Scripture faithful to Jesus—and the early Christian movement—sees the Bible through the lens of compassion, not purity.⁴

In a globalized world of ever increasing income inequality—with wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands--this message and way of living is desperately needed.

Go and do likewise. *Amen.*

³ John Pavlovitz, *"A Bigger Table,"* Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY, 2017, p. 127

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *"Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,"* Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1994, p. 59