

Since last week’s sermon was an attempt to “comfort the afflicted,” as promised I need to follow up with a sermon to “afflict the comfortable”... or, at least “challenge” the comfortable! The gospel lessons read by many churches just before the Christmas season do just that; they come from the end of Matthew, chapter 25. We are surprised, even confused by Jesus’ words, wondering if this is the same Good Shepherd Jesus , or if someone perhaps misquoted him! We heard his story about the foolish bridesmaids who did not prepare, did not bring enough oil for their lamps, so they got shut out of the wedding banquet. Then last week there was the parable of the talents where the poor fella who was afraid and buried his one talent was called a “wicked and lazy servant” and sent off into “the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Now in this week’s lesson about the sheep and the goats, often called the Last Judgment, people are sent to heaven or hell based on if they responded to the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick or the prisoner. God will judge us according to if we fed, clothed, welcomed or visited those in need!

Whew! If Matthew 25 were the only part of the Bible we read, we would conclude that God is a very demanding God, with harsh punishments reserved for people that are unprepared, indifferent, or even just afraid. Hardly seems fair. I am quite content thinking that Jesus, was a master at “rhetorical speech,” that he was making a point with strong metaphorical language. Heaven is compared to a wedding feast. And Hell is compared to a lake burning with fire and brimstone (sulfur) ... like a perhaps like a volcanic eruption, or a wildfire. It is har language, but the central idea is “Consequences.” There are consequences to our actions. So yes, there are times when we “gnash our teeth”... if we spend most of our earthly life with anxious teeth grinding, there will more of the same in an afterlife. And if we spend our earthly life not preparing ourselves with the oil of gladness, beauty, love, and things of God, we would not be prepared

to “meet God” or even recognize God on the other side! In essence, we may have shut the door on ourselves, as many people do. Self-inflicted consequences.

Moving right along... to the positive side of Jesus’ parables at the end of Matthew, perhaps to the “comfort” side. Those who were prepared with oil for their lamps enter the wedding banquet to celebrate, and those who invested their talents well and increased their talents also entered into the Joy of their master, and the sheep who responded to the needs of the hungry, naked, sick, stranger, or imprisoned also sit at the right hand of the “King” near a throne of glory... with peace, joy, light in the “Kingdom of God.” Again, we reap what we sow, and whatever our way of life here on earth, we could expect “more of the same” in an afterlife.

For me, an important word of comfort, however, is that Jesus also made it clear that any talk of “eternal life” or the “kingdom of God” really starts right now, right here on Earth! Yes, we reap what we sow, Yes, there are consequences, both good and bad to our actions, but all those things start here and now. So afterlife, eternal life, life in a heavenly kingdom are all clothed in mystery, so that concepts of heaven and hell are also a great mystery with no human being having clear sight and answers. We do know for sure, however, that there is heaven on earth and hell on earth!

So Jesus words about the sheep and the goats are meant to be a challenge, a challenge to loving action, to compassion that leads to action, and it is all about our attitude, our efforts, not about the amount or frequency of the help we give. If the story were totally literal, we might ask questions like: Is helping in the Thrift Shop helping to clothe the naked? Is giving canned goods at Thanksgiving the same as responding to someone hungry? And for one with a contagious disease ... will sending a card be enough? Or maybe a quick phone call? And visiting those in prison? How about if I contact my congress representative for more prison reform? What if I

shut off the TV screen on those pictures of starving children? What if I do ignore a beggar? (After all, there must be social programs for his kind)..... So... we can’t get too literal with Jesus words: he is painting a picture, that the challenge of God is an attitude and an effort: an attitude of compassion and the effort of some action we can take... probably Jesus would say, like all good fundraisers: it matters not the amount, but it’s the act of giving that counts; and no gift is too small.

At this time of year, we often think of gifts to charitable organizations, the church and its mission being one of them. Stewardship leaders often mention Time, Talent, and Treasure (oh how we love alliteration as a memory device!) Do you have any extra Time on your hands? Many of us do in this stay-at-home climate. Could we use the time for actual handwritten letters, or perhaps phone calls or face times to people who might be sick or lonely??? Do you have some Talent that could be used for someone in greater need during these times. Perhaps it is the gift of gab! Perhaps it is the gift of listening.... Surely there is someone out there who needs one for the other in a phone call. Welcome for the Stranger may be one of the toughest things, even in normal times... But if that is your gift, what newer person, either to your nuclear family or in our church family might you reach out to??? And then of course there is Treasure... Sure, many on fixed income or unemployment can easily say “not the time for me to consider greater financial support of my charities or church.” On the other hand, some may still have steady income even in pandemic times, and be able to invest in God’s work, knowing that investments can grow God’s spirit and work, can increase peace and joy, love and justice, both near and far.

God’s call to loving action, to compassionate action, in Matthew 25 echoes Jesus call in all his ministry. The Good Samaritan story is a key example: Who was the one who stopped and bandaged the wounds of the man left in a ditch? The Good Samaritan is surely like the “sheep” Jesus speaks of who respond to the needs of the poor.

And an amazing blessing, come in Jesus’ concluding words: “Even when you did it to the LEAST of family, you did it unto ME.” There is a story of St. Francis of Assisi. We know he was from a wealthy, very comfortable family. But one day, out riding, he felt called, moved, to dismount and greet a leper, an ugly and sick outcast. As the story is reported by William Barclay, he gave the leper a hug, and the “face of the leper changed to the face of Christ!” (“even when you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto Me”). Have you not experienced it? One who really needs help, a child, an aged person, one who is sick one who needs a welcome The face of Christ, love and gratitude, can be seen in both the giving and receiving.

One of most beloved songs about God’s challenge and call to loving action is HERE I AM LORD, based on the call to the prophet Isaiah, 6:8. Feel free to sing along!

I the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry. All who dwell in dark in sin, my hand will save. I who made the stars of night, I will make the darkness bright. Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send? *Here I am lord. Is it I lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you need me. I will hold your people in my heart.* I the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame. I will set a feast for them. My hand will save. Finest bread I will provide till their hearts be satisfied. I will give my life to them. Whom shall I send? *Here I am lord. Is it I lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you need me. I will hold your people in my heart.*

The cries of the poor and the sick are all around. Will we respond with our Time, Talent and Treasure? Will we respond like Isaiah, “Here I am, Send me.” May it be so. Amen.