

When Did We See You? – Matthew 25:31-46 – November 26, 2017

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Today is the final Sunday of the Church year, as next Sunday we begin the season of Advent. The Gospel of Matthew has been our companion since this time last year, and, if you recall, one of the main themes of this gospel has been to show what the kingdom of God looks like. When Jesus came, he taught his followers how to live in this kingdom. He taught them about compassion, justice, mercy, forgiveness, humility, sacrifice, equity, and equality. He taught them that the law of God could be summarized into two commandments – to love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And he reminded them that God always stands with those who are poor, marginalized, grieving, lost, weak, displaced, and suffering.

Jesus used stories, metaphors, and parables to teach his followers so they would learn more about how to be in relationship to God and how to be in relationship to other people. Oftentimes our natural inclination is to put ourselves and our needs before anyone else, and so Jesus' teachings are difficult and require actual effort on our parts to change who we are and how we relate to others. To live in Christ is to live into a new identity. It is learning to live as one claimed by God in our baptism, brought into relationship with God through Christ, and to be nurtured in the life of faith by the Holy Spirit. The hope is that one day, living as Jesus has taught us to live becomes so natural, we don't even realize we are doing it.

In our passage for today, Jesus tells his followers a parable about the final judgement. The people will be gathered before the king and placed into two groups – the sheep and the goats. The sheep are rewarded because they have given food to the hungry, cared for the sick, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and given water to the thirsty. The goats are punished because they have not done these things. But what is surprising to both groups is that the king reveals to them that either showing compassion to or withholding compassion from some random person is the same as showing compassion or withholding compassion from the king himself.

Such is the mystery of our relationship with God. That God loves each of us so much, that God resides within each one of us. Not only have we been created in God's image,

but when we look at one another, we are looking into the very face of Christ. That is pretty amazing.

Now, when we hear this parable of the final judgment, it probably causes us some discomfort. We know we have neglected our calling to love others as ourselves. We know that as much as we try to show God's love to other people, we fail more often than not. We might as well go ahead and jump in the group with all the other goats.

But I don't think all is lost. We just need the reminder of this parable – that when we reach out in love to others, we are reaching out to Christ. And maybe that's the motivation we need. Not to act out of some sense of fear of judgement or punishment, but acting in love because we have recognized the innate worth of the other. To see others not as the world sees, but as God sees. That is grace.

I'd like to share with a story called *The Messiah Is Among You*.

There was once an old stone monastery tucked away in the middle of a picturesque forest. For many years people would make the significant detour required to seek out this monastery. The peaceful spirit of the place was healing for the soul.

In recent years however fewer and fewer people were making their way to the monastery. The monks had grown jealous and petty in their relationships with one another, and the animosity was felt by those who visited.

The Abbot of the monastery was distressed by what was happening, and poured out his heart to his good friend Sarah. Sarah was a wise Jewish rabbi. Having heard the Abbot's tale of woe she asked if she could offer a suggestion. "Please do," responded the Abbot. "Anything you can offer."

Sarah said that she had received a vision, an important vision, and the vision was this: the messiah was among the ranks of the monks. The Abbot was flabbergasted. One among his own was the Messiah! Who could it be? He knew it wasn't himself, but who? He raced back to the monastery and shared his exciting news with his fellow monks.

The monks grew silent as they looked into each other's faces. Was this one the Messiah?

From that day on the mood in the monastery changed. Joseph and Ivan started talking again, neither wanting to be guilty of slighting the Messiah. Pierre and Naibu left behind their frosty anger and sought out each other's forgiveness. The monks began serving each other, looking out for opportunities to assist, seeking healing and forgiveness where offence had been given.

As one traveler, then another, found their way to the monastery, word soon spread about the remarkable spirit of the place. People once again took the journey to the monastery and found themselves renewed and transformed. All because those monks knew the Messiah was among them. <http://storiesforpreaching.com/the-messiah-is-among-you/>