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11/26/23, Matthew 25:31-46

Our reading today is often referred to as The Last Judgment. The author of Matthew's Gospel believed Jesus would come a second time and pass judgment on human beings. Those deemed worthy would inherit the kingdom of God and enter into eternal life. Those deemed unworthy would be sent into the eternal fire and suffer the same eternal punishment prepared for the devil and his angels.

Now, there's something interesting about this. It says, "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." That term, the nations, always refers to Gentiles. So, those being judged are not just Jewish people or followers of Jesus. It's people of every nation.

That means most of those gathered would not have ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth. They would not have been church members. They would not have been instructed in church doctrine. They would not have heard the stories of Jesus healing lepers and walking on water. They would not have known about the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descending upon him, and God's voice affirming him. Many of those gathered would not have heard of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We might wonder how people of "the nations" can be judged fairly when they don't know the story? But then when we hear the criteria for judgment, it begins to make sense. The judgment is not based on whether or not a person accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The judgment is not based on how well people know their Bible or on what they believe.

The judgment is based on how they treat people, and not just any people, but the most vulnerable. Throughout the Bible, God has a special concern for the weakest and least powerful people in society. We repeatedly hear concern for widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor, because they were the most vulnerable.

Leviticus: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God"

(Leviticus 19:34).

Deuteronomy: "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow"

(Deuteronomy 27:19).

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19)

In the N.T. book of James: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27).

Throughout the Bible, God has a special concern for the most vulnerable in society. So, the last judgment is based upon our response to those people. To those who are judged favorably Jesus said, "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."

Were told the righteous will then say, "Lord, when did we do all these things?" To which Jesus replies, "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."

To those at his left hand, Jesus said, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire." Jesus went through the same examples. I was hungry and you did not give me food. I was thirsty and you did not give me something to drink. I was naked and you did not clothe me.

They asked, "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?" He said, "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."

So that's it. It appears at the bottom line for Jesus, the basis of his judgment is how do you treat the most vulnerable in society. Do we acknowledge their existence or do we ignore them? Do we make their lives easier or do we make their lives harder?

The other day, this movie called *The Butler* was on television. It's the story of a black man who grew up in the early 1900s in the South. His family were sharecroppers. The white folks who owned the farm decided to groom him to be a servant in the house. When they gave him his instructions for serving meals, they said, "I don't want to be aware of your presence. I don't even want to hear you breathe. If you are doing your job right, you will be invisible to us."

That young man eventually became a butler to the president of the United States in the White House. But that scene convicted me. I know there are people working jobs,

serving me in various ways, that tend to be invisible. There have been times when I've reluctantly acknowledged the presence of such people.

One of the challenges of doing the things Jesus cares about: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger is that we are not often in close proximity to them. Although, recently, I got a different perspective on that. We held an informational session here at the church on the challenges faced by asylum-seekers in southern Maine.

It was fascinating to hear their stories. Many of them leave everything behind to simply live without fear of persecution or death. Among the challenges they face is the fact that their presence makes people uncomfortable. Also they're not allowed to work when they first arrive in this country, which makes life very difficult. Hearing their stories, I thought about this morning's text. "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."

There is a well-known prayer in the Episcopal church's prayer book. It goes like this: Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

I love that line: we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. It acknowledges that there are sins of omission. We sin by not being a voice for the voiceless. We sin by not feeding the hungry, by not welcoming the stranger, by not showing compassion for the one in need.

I once heard a story told by a photographer. He was chronicling relief efforts to poor and hungry people in Peru. There was a truck full of food that pulled into this impoverished area. People stood in line waiting for something from that truck. Before they got to the end of the line and everyone received something, they ran out of food.

The photographer noticed one young girl. She had waited a long time, in the hot sun, for food and did not receive anything. Then, someone handed her a banana. The photographer watched her as she took the banana and walked across the way to where there were some children sitting in the shade of a tree.

She then peeled the banana divided in three and gave one piece each to what turned out to be her siblings. Then she began chewing on the rind. The photographer said, "It was then that I saw the kingdom of God." I've always remembered that story because of the selfless act of that young girl. Jesus said, "When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me."

In God's eyes, the most vulnerable members of society are a treasure. And I want to leave you with one more story. Persecution was a daily reality for third-century Christians in Rome. And in 258, the Emperor Valerian issued an edict commanding that all bishops, priests, and deacons should be put to death. He gave the Roman Imperial treasury power to confiscate all money and possessions from Christians.

In light of the news, Pope Sixtus II quickly ordained a young Spanish theologian, Lawrence, to become archdeacon of Rome. The important position put Lawrence in charge of the Church's riches, and it gave him responsibility for the Church's outreach to the poor. The pope sensed his own days were numbered and therefore commissioned Lawrence to protect the Church's treasure.

On August 6, 258, Valerian captured Pope Sixtus and had him beheaded. Afterwards, he set his sights on Brother Lawrence. But before killing him, the Emperor demanded the archdeacon turn over all the riches of the Church. He gave Brother Lawrence three days to round it up.

Working quickly, Brother Lawrence sold the Church's vessels and gave the money to widows and the sick. He distributed all the Church's property to the poor. On the third day, the Emperor summoned Lawrence to his palace and asked for the treasure.

Brother Lawrence entered the palace, stopped, and then gestured back to the door where, streaming in behind him, poured crowds of poor, crippled, blind, and suffering people. He then proclaimed, "These are the true treasures of the Church."