

Gospel – Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said to his disciples:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory,
and all the angels with him,
he will sit upon his glorious throne,
and all the nations will be assembled before him.

And he will separate them one from another,
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right,
'Come, you who are blessed by my Father.

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 drink,

a stranger and you welcomed me,

naked and you clothed me,

ill and you cared for me,

in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him and say,

'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,
or thirsty and give you drink?

When did we see you a stranger and welcome you,
or naked and clothe you?

When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'

And the king will say to them in reply,

'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did
for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left,

'Depart from me, you accursed,
into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was hungry and you gave me no food,

I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

a stranger and you gave me no welcome,

naked and you gave me no clothing,

ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.'

Then they will answer and say,

'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison,
and not minister to your needs?'

He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you,

what you did not do for one of these least ones,
you did not do for me.'

And these will go off to eternal punishment,
but the righteous to eternal life."

Gospel Study – *Whatever You Do*

Reading today's beautiful parable about the separation of the sheep and goats, I'm reminded of the days when I was teaching high school. As my students would always learn from me after a while, the most important class was the last class of the semester. I would say, "Now, all right, here are the questions that you might find on the final exam." And then they got out their notebooks and were very studious, saying, "Go slow. Go slow." You could just see them taking down every single note and because I was trying to be more than fair—being kind—to be sure to review or, if you will, preview with them everything we would have covered of importance—and more so that they would be tested on because, if I didn't, I would hear about it.

It was fascinating because one time, in teaching this class on Scripture, I said, "Okay, here is the question that you can be sure will appear on your final exam: 'When I was hungry did you give me something to eat?'" And they would be writing this down: "When I was thirsty, did you give me something to drink?" I was continuing along with this parable and finally one student said, "Is this a trick question?" I said, "No, but I want you to get it. These are the questions to our final exam." Brothers and sisters take note; don't anybody miss this. We're at the end of the year. This is the last class of the liturgical season. This summarizes most of what we try to cover in other parables, even recently, about when Christ comes again. Don't miss this lesson; know these questions because surely, at the end the time, we will be asked how we have answered these questions in our life. I was quick to always remind my students, "By the way, I promise that I won't fail anybody." They reminded me, "How can you fail anybody in religion?" I reminded them too, "Only you can fail yourself. If you fail to take these questions seriously... If you fail to understand the importance of these lessons... You fail yourselves."

And that's what we're looking at today. May we take this lesson to heart like no other Gospel. Brothers and sisters, I'm asking for your most serious attention. Jesus is certainly wanting to teach us something that I think is absolutely crystal clear in the parable. It is so hard in interpreting and assimilating and putting into action in our life, so let's carefully, prayerfully, seriously, go through this parable now.

Jesus said to His disciples, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, escorted by all the angels in Heaven, He will sit upon the throne." I can picture the beautiful mosaic upstairs where Christ sits on the throne. He sits there and we're told, "All the nations will be assembled before Him." *All the nations* is a phrase that means: *all humanity...all people of all time*. What Jesus is giving us here is a vision of things to come; namely our judgment day when we will be called before the

throne of God and we will have to see ourselves and our life for what it truly is and who we have truly been. We will be judged based on what our life has been.

Then, we're told, in this wonderful analogy or metaphor, "Then he will separate them into two groups as a shepherd separates sheep from goats." Now in ancient Palestine, I read and learned, that sheep and goats graze together on the same hillside at the same time during the day. But at night, remember the night of life—think of it in those terms—the shepherd will come along and separate the sheep and the goats because the sheep prefer to be out in the open air and the goats needed to be protected from the cold elements and so they were brought into shelter.

Then we're told about Jesus: "The sheep He will place on his right hand and the goats on His left." The sheep are more valuable and so they're given better treatment in this parable and image. Sheep obviously symbolize good people that are placed on the right side—which was a sign of favor—just as Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the father. The right hand is a sign of strength, a sign of favor. It's a hand we extend in love and friendship; the right hand. The left hand, you might know, the word for left in Latin is sinister. Did you know that? It has a double meaning—sorry for anyone who is left handed here, I ask your forgiveness—but the image, of course, is the goats (representing the bad people) are placed on that other side because they had been on the wrong side of Christ and are the poor and the needy.

And the king will say to those on his right, "Come, you have my Father's blessing. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world." Someone once described kingdom as *kin-dom* which represents the place where we are all kin. Where we recognize that we are all brothers and sisters; that place where we're invited to come home to Heaven.

Then the parable continues. The king says, "For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was there when you comforted me in prison and you came to visit me." What's a wonderful image here is that Christ is King—as we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King Sunday—but a king unlike any we know. Most of us know kings that live royal lives in palaces better than any, yet Christ does what seems to be the opposite. He seems to live and identify completely with the poorest of the poor; the neediest of all. What does that say about what kind of king Christ is or what kind of kingdom he's trying to establish?

He mentions this list of traditional needs that we've come to know as the corporal works of mercy. Whatever we do to the needy, we might say today, we do to Christ. Isn't it amazing how Jesus completely identifies Himself with these people? You might say that Jesus takes everything we do to others personally. Then the just will ask Him, "Lord, when do we see you hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we welcome you away from home or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we visit you when you were ill or in prison?" Notice the triple question, "When did we see you?" Even those who did it, didn't

recognize the importance of their gift in the moment. They didn't know how they had come to encounter Christ.

It's so easy for all of us to miss that Christ is among us; as close to us as a person at our side and especially among us in the neediest of all. The king will then say to them, "I assure you as often as you did it to one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it for me." The word least in Greek—in the parable here in which it's written—is the superlative term for little ones. These are the little ones in our family and society. They are those we would consider least important in the worldly sense. Those least mean the most to Christ. Isn't that interesting? Again, He just turns the world's values upside down and inside out; calling for our attention.

Then He says to those on his left, "Out of my sight you condemned. Go into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." This is a clear indication of the reality of hell. Even though many people want to dispute it, how could we dispute it or even wonder about it? We have a choice: to live lives of love or live lives without love. That choice is ours, so we go to that place either of love or that place where there is a total lack of love. Then He repeats Himself. In this parable He really wants us again to learn these lessons so well.

"I was hungry; you gave me no food. I was thirsty; you gave me no drink." Again these people asked the same questions: "Wait a minute, when do we see you hungry?" They had no idea they had overlooked Christ, in overlooking the poor and the needy. You know what's amazing? I often think of this because I hear sometimes people say, "Let's get back to the basics. We need to learn the 10 Commandments again—and I don't disagree, I believe we do—but I'm quick to add, "If you live following and obeying the 10 Commandments perfectly, that will not get you into Heaven because you wouldn't have done, necessarily, anything Jesus is talking about right here, right now." Isn't that something? If you follow all the rules without failure or fault, yet fail to love or to give of yourselves to those in need, you have failed in the greatest and most important commandment of all.

I doubt that many of us even see it as a sin, to be honest, I seldom hear this even mentioned as a sin. The worst sin, I believe, is apathy or passivity. This should really shake us up. This is a wake-up call if anyone is sleeping on what Jesus is asking of us. Do you hear it? He is saying that He is the poor. Do we know who the poor are? Do we? Do we even know who is in need? The tendency is to avoid that issue and those harder questions in life.

He ends then with the point: "These will go off to eternal punishment and the just to eternal life." This reminds us of what I read once. St. John of the Cross said, "In the evening of life we will be judged on one question and that is: 'How well have you loved?'" This is what it's all about. This is the bottom line Gospel. This is it. Whatever we do to the needy, we do to others; even those least brothers and sisters. Now we have to ask the question: Who are the least brothers and sisters in our life? Who immediately comes to your mind? What face do you see as you hear the words

"least brothers and sisters?" It may well be someone in your own family; someone very close to us who we think least about or would consider least of all to be like Christ.

We are all going to be surprised on Judgment Day. Christ will take on the identity of the people we had the very hardest time with. One man who was struggling with prejudice finally came to see and he said, "You know, I finally realized, I bet when I meet my Judgment Day, God's going to be an African-American woman and He's going to stand right in front of me. He's going to say, 'When I was... You did...!' Hear what I'm saying? He's going to take on that identity."

He got it. That's it. And so we've got to work through whatever is the barrier between us and Christ. We can never say we're close to Christ if we are far from others who we're withholding love from. Once we identify who the little ones are, how do we see Jesus in them? Mother Teresa teaches us this lesson; I don't know anyone who lives this Gospel better than Mother Teresa, right? Her whole life is radically living out this parable. She takes this so seriously. She truly, deeply, completely, believes that with every poor person she sees, she sees Christ. And so when she's attending to them, as she once said to an interviewer, "I spend every day, all day, with Jesus. I hold Him. I feed Him. I care for Him and I'm so blessed to be with Him."

There it is. How do we spend the day with Jesus? Who are the little ones in our life and how do we see Christ? It can't be any easier for Mother Teresa than for us. Jesus comes in many distressing disguises. You know how he's camouflaged in some of the people I have to work with. You knew too, I'm sure. How do we see Christ deep inside their soul? Then we ask, "So what do we need to do? What do we need to do?"

I'd like to present a little collage or kaleidoscope of reflections on this Gospel because I have really struggled with this myself. How do we take this to heart? There are so many ways we need to interpret this because the poor are among us. I'll never forget when Mother Teresa spoke in our Cathedral upstairs and she reminded us that the poorest people she's met in the world are here in America. Their poverty is more emotional and spiritual because there's so much need for love and attention and self-respect and our support. She begged us to reach out first to our own families who may be starving for our love and thirsty for self-respect; of course she urged us to seek Christ in them.

I remember after talking once about Mother Teresa, a woman was so inspired by what the Lord was saying to her, she decided when she went back to her classroom that she was going to find Christ in this guy; he was the worst troublemaker in her class. She said, "Alright Lord. Help me. I'm going to see Christ in him. And she worked at it and gradually she was able to bring herself to give him more of her attention and more of her time and truly more of her loving concern. Do you know, she reported back to me two weeks later that within a short amount of time she noticed a difference. And more than that, one of her fellow teachers who taught the second part of the class noticed one day and observed to her, "What is it that came over so-and-so? I see a change in him." Isn't that something? What love can do. Then she realizes what I've come to see

too. It seems like those who are the least lovable are the ones who need the most love and the ones who Christ most identifies with. So what does that mean?

This Gospel is so challenging isn't it? There's another woman I think, not unlike Mother Teresa in a certain way, although she has a very different kind of early life. I speak of Dorothy Day. She's a great inspiration. I'd like to share some snippets of her life. She grew up, a very difficult life; struggled as a young person, had several sexual affairs. She even had an abortion which she deeply regretted; and later even a child out of wedlock. She had always a political bent so she became involved in the Communist Party here in America. Later she was inspired by a religious sister who served the poor and she wondered, "What is it that made this sister do this?" She followed her and saw that it was her great love for the Lord and great love for the Lord's people. And she was so inspired by this nun, she sought to follow her and imitate her and its lead her to a great interest in the Catholic Church. She then, as she grew in her own spiritual journey, came to a decision where she left her live-in boyfriend who would not be married to her—to make a relationship right in God's eyes—and with her daughter left and became baptized into the Catholic Church. She wanted to spend her life doing whatever the Lord would lead her to do.

What happened? One December morning in 1932 she was in Washington DC, she was a journalist for *Commonweal*, and she was covering a Communist demonstration there in the capital city. She had mixed feelings about this March; wishing that she could actually join them and feeling sympathetic to their desire for solidarity with the poor, which she found always more than religious people. Yet she knew that she didn't believe anymore in any of their philosophy but in the deep truths of the Catholic and Christian faith.

After following the demonstration and writing her report, she went and visited the Immaculate Conception Church in Washington DC and she prayed to God, asking Him, "How can I give my life in service to you and the poor?" She had no idea how quickly and completely God would answer her prayer. When she returned home the day after—to her apartment in New York City—she met a young man named Peter Marrin who was a former religious, who had great love for the Lord and a great idea of the social Gospel teaching and shared this with her and presented a vision that would become reality. Later, Dorothy Day and Peter Marrin developed the Catholic worker movement in America. Through both of them, they've established hundreds of houses of hospitality across this nation; feeding the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, and giving shelter to the homeless and care to the needy.

She always said—even as many people confronted her, even the Cardinal of New York at the time—she said, "You know, when people hear that we feed the poor they think that I'm a saint. If I ask them the question, 'Why are there poor?' They think I'm a Communist." We need to ask these harder questions. Dorothy Day spent her life as a prophet for peace and justice even going to prison in protest against the Vietnam War. She was a champion of the poor. By the way, she went to Mass every single day. Like Mother Theresa, she found her strength to live that mission from the Lord.

I think of Dorothy Day today of course, as we think about this parable. She herself said, “We should see Christ in others; nothing else, just Christ. And then love them.” I think that's the secret. There it is. How can we see Christ in others and just love them? How many of us would be willing, like Dorothy Day, to go and pray soon after we leave here today and ask the same question of God? "Lord, what would you want to do with me? How would you want to use my time and talents? Tell me; show me. I'm ready to follow and obey. Would you be willing to do that with me? We all could do it. Think what God could do through us as he used the one little boy with only a couple loaves of bread and fish to feed the multitude. That's certainly what the miracle He worked through Dorothy Day and people like mother Theresa was. This is what it's about.

I think we're going to see a lot of surprises on our Judgment Day; who is in and who is out. Who is withholding and how we unknowingly did not recognize Christ? That would be the saddest thing. We see people all the time on the streets and I bet you're faced with beggars asking, begging, for money. How do we handle this? We need to ask that question. They remind us of our brothers and sisters. I try to look at them and see them in such a light, but I don't give them money. What I do is, I try to support places like The Drop In Center that house them and feed them. I think we're better and more responsible in giving to those programs because I think it's the responsible way to get to the real needs and do the greatest amount of good.

When people give a little handout, do we think that's really giving to the poor? My thought is that's hardly starting; we've got to get more serious about this. I believe...I suggest...I ask your prayers about tithing; giving 10% of your income, if it's possible. I suggest giving 5% to your parish church (wherever that is) and 5% to charity. If we knew Jesus is the person soliciting our charitable donation—and we have to discern that very carefully—God knows we can't answer everyone, but using what little we have, how can we dispense that in a responsible, charitable way?

A man was troubled by this one day and went to pray: "God, how could you allow people to be starving all around the world?" After a moment of quiet reflection, it's as though he heard God say to him, "I have been wanting to ask you the same question. How could you allow people to go starving?" I don't know how we do it. Somebody says, "Think globally, and act locally." I also think that charity begins at home and maybe the first person we need to look to is even ourselves. We have learned that we need to take care of ourselves in order to be able to give care better to others. Maybe we need some of our own kindness for we starve for our own rest, or encouragement, or love, so that we can then better give to others. Amen.