

The Kind Way to the Kingdom

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text

Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

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." ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Prayer

Sermon

She was maybe seven or eight years old, standing in the check out line in KMart all by herself. Mom had given her a five dollar bill and said she could choose something *on her own*. Then she was to meet Mom back at the door. She stood in line with the playdough set, the one with so

many colors and that thing you put the playdough through to make silly spaghetti. She was ready with her money, barely able to see over the side of the rolling belt. She had never done this before. 4.99, the label said, just right. The cashier asked her for her item very kindly, and rang it up, and said, that will be 5.24, please. She didn't know what to do. But ma'am, it says 4.99. I only have five dollars. The cashier leaned over and said, I'm sorry, there's something called sales tax that we add to every item. This actually costs five dollars and twenty four cents.

She had only five dollars, and her Mom was all the way at the door where she could barely see her and, oh no!

There was someone behind her, tall, gray haired, and in a deep voice they said, Well now, that can be confusing, I agree. But listen here. And as they were speaking they handed the cashier a bill with more digits on it. Listen here. I'm going to pay for that playdough with my stuff here, so you just go ahead and take it and go on back to your mom. You enjoy that, it looks super fun.

Umm... she thought. What do I do now? And she remembered her manners and she looked up into kind brown eyes that looked back at her and she smiled and they smiled and she said, Thank you, and she scooped up that playdough and ran over to her mom who said, wasn't that just the kindest thing.

Back in 1982, that was me in the check out aisle, not knowing about sales tax.

What I remember about that encounter is the adult, a total stranger, who looked upon me with kindness, helped me out of a confusing moment, and practiced generosity.

I can't imagine that person thinking, well, I really want to be a sheep here, so let me just figure out how to treat this child the way I'd treat Jesus if Jesus were in the KMart check out in front of me because then I'll pass the test. Our text says *the sheep were surprised* Jesus felt they'd ministered to him - they weren't angling at reward. That's just how they lived. My guess is that the person behind me in line simply was the kind of person who tried to be kind to everyone they met. And maybe they were kind because they wanted to live in a kind world.

It means an awful lot to be on the receiving end of kindness. Think about the times when you were treated with dignity and compassion. Think about the times when someone looked you in the eyes the way they might look at Jesus. The world we want to live in, I think, is marked by kindness, compassion, dignity and justice. When we feed and clothe, welcome and visit, we are building the world we want to live in.

"Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible." - Dalai Lama

Even in the CoVid times we live in, we can make space to be kind.

And every time we are kind, every time we feed someone hungry, give water to a thirsty person literally or spiritually, offer hospitality, take care of someone in need, visit the sick, offer hospitality, or sit with someone in prison - we are building the kingdom.

Every time we practice compassion and every time we act for justice, we are building the kingdom.

And may that not be because we want to be able to pass Jesus' judgment, but because we want to live in the realm that Jesus himself imagined and described for us, a world where there is enough for everyone - enough dignity, enough mercy, enough food, enough water, enough welcome, enough liberation, enough freedom, enough dignity, enough justice. We want to live in a world where everyone is seen as an image of Jesus, a manifestation of God.

Jesus said what he was sent for, in Luke 4:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Those of us who follow this teacher, this is what we are about.

Now, some of you are asking yourselves, is that cute little KMart check out in 1982 story really sufficient to the moment in which we live today? How could buying a child's toy lead to a just world? It's a fair point. Folks, we have to match interpersonal kindness, compassion and justice with systemic kindness, compassion, and justice to build that better world. It's like this: when everyone treats everyone the way we'd treat Jesus, all of us move toward living in that kingdom. And maybe the second part of this morning's text is provoking you and giving you some stress, and no we haven't dealt with that part yet either. The way I've been thinking about it this week is as a natural consequence.

Jesus spoke dramatically to get people's attention and these are shocking words -

“depart from me into the eternal fire” -

But I wonder if the natural consequence for everyone of othering, oppression, greed, and unfair treatment is a diminished world.

I'm moved to think systemically in this way by Heather McGhee. I hope you have also read her recent book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* - or you'll go find it soon. Examining the impacts of systemic racism in a variety of contexts, she makes two key points: the fingerprints of racism are on societal ills that hurt everyone of every race and class; conversely everyone benefits when everyone benefits. McGhee debunks the "zero sum paradigm" - that one person or group can only thrive at someone else's expense - and she lifts up solid empirical evidence for a "solidarity dividend."¹

It's hard for us UCC folks to hear Jesus offering a word of judgment because so many of us are universalists when it comes right down to it, believing in the abundant grace of an all-loving God. And I'll tell you what, I do believe in God's unbounded mercy. But I don't think we should let ourselves off the hook, ignore this word of judgment, this moment when Jesus says this is what's right and this is what's wrong. This passage has a purpose: to provoke us toward the basileia, the kingdom, the reign of God. It reminds us that the way we treat others reflects what we believe about God. So if we are prodded, provoked, discomfited and dragged away from the goat pen, so be it.

Barbara Brown Taylor, preaching on this passage, reflected on how hard it is to live up to its expectations. "How do we find the courage to get up in the morning? That is the question. But the Bible is not a book with answers in the back. All I know is that we are asked to wrestle."²

And so it is, with a text like this - we are challenged and provoked and held to a standard we might feel unable to meet.

But there is a good word in the Bible when we are there - which is that we are never alone in the challenge.

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121)

¹ xxi-xxii in the book.

² From a sermon in *The Preaching Life*.

As I move on from this sermon, let me close with the wisdom of another pastor, Eric Fistler, who says of this challenging text: what we need to be doing now is not separating the sheep from the goats, but figuring out who's hungry.³ Amen.

³ From the Pulpit Fiction podcast from Christ the King Sunday 2020.