

**First Sunday of Christmas
January 1, 2017
Marley United Methodist Church**

Ecclesiastes 3.1-13

Psalm 8

Revelation 21.1-6a

Matthew 25-31.46*

A Question of Sheep and Goats

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen

One of the issues that has long plagued the church is the way many people manage to leave their Christian faith behind when they leave the worship service. You can look long and hard, but they lead a secular life the other 6 days – and it is often a life which brings no glory to God or the church.

And for others, well, the question of the relationship between what we say in church and how we treat people outside is still a live one. It is a struggle. This gospel reading puts the question in very stark terms.

If you've ever wrestled with the question of how best to respond to a beggar on the street corner, and the image of Christ dividing the sheep and the goats comes to your mind, you'll know what I mean.

The thing that is so confrontational about this description of the final judgment is that it is so simple, and yet so difficult, and that it really demolishes any boundaries we have between what we do in church and what we do in the street. It is telling us that how we treat the hungry, the needy, the imprisoned, the dirty, the smelly, the confused and the tormented is actually read by God as a measure of our devotion to Jesus. "What you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you are doing to me."

Now if you read this as a law that must be obeyed to the letter in every

situation, not only will you exhaust and impoverish yourself very quickly, but you will also find yourself tormented by guilt and fear. It is simply not possible to visit every sick person and every prisoner, or to feed all the hungry and welcome every stranger. None of us have the resources or the time and energy to respond to every need we ever hear about. This is even more true in today's world than it was in Jesus day because it is now possible for us to be aware of hungry, the sick and the prisoners on the other side of the world, and to pick up the phone and a credit card and make a response. But if you do that every time an image of a hungry person is beamed into your living room, someone will soon be cutting up your credit cards. So if it is simply not possible, how on earth are we supposed to respond to the message of this description of the final judgment?

This is a bit of an aside, but it may help address some of the guilt questions. It's worth noting that at the beginning of this, Jesus says it is the nations who are gathered for judgment. It is probably the case that it is more realistic and legitimate to read this as a judgment of the nations than as a judgment of individuals. When we ask how a nation cares for its sick and how a nation cares for its prisoners, and even how a nation cares for the hungry on the either side of the world, we are asking questions which needs to be asked and which can be answered. Nations do have the means to respond to whole people groups in a way that individuals do not.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that that means it is just governments and its leaders who are being judged. A nation is still the sum of its people and at least in "democratic" countries like ours, the government is to a large extent a reflection of the people and their values and opinions. It would be a mistake to conclude that because it is about the nations that therefore it's not about us, because when God punishes a nation, it is all the people who receive the punishment, not just the government.

The nation won't change unless its people change, and if we want the people to change, then we'd better be prepared for the change to begin with us. So we might be freed somewhat from the fear of the big judgment, but we are still going to be asked how we personally responded to the

teaching of these words of Jesus.

I'm not going to give a detailed set of answers and instructions here. That would be to create a new set of laws, and if you don't know anything else about me, you should know that, like Paul, I do not hold with religious laws. Instead I want to give an image that may give you a new way of approaching the question and perhaps provoke some useful discussion of ideas. The image is this: Jesus is saying that every person you encounter, and especially those usually considered the least, is an icon of Jesus Christ – now I don't mean icon as in the little pictures that show up on your computer screen. The traditional icons that we use in prayer and worship are representations of Jesus that when contemplated over time begin to reveal things to us about who Jesus is. We treat them with respect and reverence because of their association with the one they represent. This is not a completely foreign concept to us, because if I walked into your house and took a photo of your grandmother down and stomped on it, you'd be hurt and insulted not because I damaged a picture but because that image represents the person and if I defiled the image I'd be defiling the memories of the person. Our reverence of the holy icons is much the same idea.

So if we say that each person is an icon of Christ, it is quite a big statement. It is to say that to me, each of you represents Christ. And to mistreat you is to mistreat Christ. And the import of that statement becomes even greater if we emphasize that it is those who society generally regards as the least who are most especially icons of Jesus Christ. And perhaps then it is even true that it is in the very things that cause them to be regarded as the least – their sickness, their poverty, their brokenness, their destitution, their anti-social habits – that most reveal Jesus to us. We are used to saying that Jesus identified himself with the sin and brokenness of the world on the cross and took upon himself all our infirmities and woundedness. But it is a more difficult, but ultimately unavoidable, step to see in the brokenness and wretchedness of others the image of the suffering Christ.

This certainly doesn't mean that we have to become a soft touch for every junkie who tries to con a spare dollar out of you. If you actually love that junkie, if you see the image of Christ in them, it means that you want more

for them than whatever they want that dollar for. It also means that making a habit of snarling contemptuously and writing to the council to clean them off the streets is not an option either. For this one too is an icon of Christ. "What you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you are doing to me."

As I said, I'm not giving the answers here. That's partly because I don't know what they are. But what I'm saying is that finding our way to the answers will begin with contemplating the Christ revealed in those around us. Next time you find yourself haunted by an image of someone in need, whether it be someone who asked you for a dollar on the street or someone you saw malnourished on a fundraising appeal on TV, take that image with you to prayer. Spend some time asking Jesus to show you how he is in that person, how that person reveals more of who Jesus is. Genuine and worthwhile action for justice does not usually come from knee jerk reactions, but from a deepening prayerful understanding of what is going on and where God is within it. And if you and I spend a bit more time contemplating the meaning of the icons on the street corners and praying for them, we are far more likely to begin to see how and where the reign of God can begin with us.

Amen