

Matthew 25: 31-46 “The Outsiders” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/10/24

Upon moving to California from the Midwest 20 years ago, our family had a rude awakening. In the Kansas City suburb of Raymore, we were used to leaving our front door unlocked, keys in the car, and kids to play outside after dark. In the first month of living in Selma, my ex-husband’s Honda Accord was stolen from our driveway because no one told us you don’t leave your keys in the car (I know it sounds ridiculous but from our perspective, it was never a concern). Three months later, someone broke into our garage and stole our van – it was found in a vineyard stripped and burned. It’s possible the keys were again left in the vehicle because it had been stored behind a locked garage door and sometimes we forgot to take them out. This time, I went before the City Council and asked what was up in this Fresno suburb that cars keep getting stolen. The Mayor’s first question was literally, “Pastor, which side of Hwy. 99 do you live on, the west side which is the rougher side or the east side, the better part?” I paused a moment, caught off guard by the question and then responded, “I’m on the east side but what does that matter?” No response, but I could tell it wasn’t the answer they wanted. You see, it’s much easier to discount the safety and well-being of folks if they live on the wrong side of the tracks.

S.E. Hinton wrote a book entitled *The Outsiders*, a coming-of-age story, which was turned into a film in 1983 and Tony-award winning Broadway musical of 2023. The movie became a cult classic, creating stars out of names like Diane Lane, Tom Cruise, Patrick Swayze, Emilio Estevez, Rob Lowe, and C. Thomas Howell. This book about living on the wrong side of the tracks was a favorite of some Fresno students and their librarian, who eventually decided to write the great film-maker Francis Ford Coppola pleading for him to make a film adaptation. He ended up dedicating the film to that group, who incidentally lived on the wrong side of Hwy. 99. I watched the movie again this week about the Curtis brothers whose parents are deceased. The oldest, Darry, is trying to raise and support Sodapop and Ponyboy, his younger brothers in 1965 Tulsa where the youth subculture is centered around 2 gangs – the wealthy “Socs” and the poorer “Greasers.” Ponyboy’s best friend, Johnny, has a horrible home life due to

severe domestic violence while Ponyboy struggles to feel loved by his older brother, so the two become bff's over their family troubles. One night, several Socs spot them alone at the local park and attack them, just because they are the outsiders, the ones who don't fit in. When Ponyboy is almost drowned at the park fountain, Johnny intervenes stabbing and killing one of the Soc attackers. In order to avoid being arrested, the two run off and hide in an abandoned, broken-down church in a town off the beaten tracks for a couple weeks. At one point, they are away from the church when it catches fire and several children get trapped by the fire. The boys return just in time to save the lives of the trapped children, but Johnny is severely burnt in the process. They become town heroes, a judge exonerates Johnny for stabbing the Soc boy in self-defense, and the Greasers defeat the Socs in a gang rumble. But ultimately Johnny doesn't survive his burns and shortly before he dies, he dictates a note to Ponyboy to "stay gold," quoting Robert Frost's poem. It becomes a voice from beyond telling him to take notice of golden sunsets and gold-flecked fall leaves, to not miss the fleeting, beautiful moments which grace our lives, despite the pain which so often accompanies being on the outside. Outsiders are far more than their circumstances.

As I grappled with the events of the week, the movie spoke to me about perceptions we hold about those who are different from us, the ways the characters tried to find common ground despite the disparities. I am aware that we are a diverse congregation with many different viewpoints, seeking to work together as the Body of Christ in this time and place. There are those who are rejoicing and those who are weeping over the election results. To those who won, it is on them to care for those whose hearts are broken and to those who are hurting, it is on them to allow for the joy of the others. So much speculation has been done in how and why things happen as they did, but pastors of our denomination across the nation gathered online this week not to speculate but to seek God's direction and word for these times. Many were changing the scriptures they were preaching on, but I decided to stick with the text chosen over a month ago out of our Stewardship emphasis.

In this shocking and, some would say, most important parable of Jesus', we find the significance of perspective playing out in vivid detail. In our national climate, we recognize that *who* we are determines *what* we see and what we see determines what we *do*. A story is told about a man who was standing on one side of a river yelling across the rushing water to another on the opposite side of the river. He shouts, "How do I get to the other side?" The other responds, "You *are* on the other side." Apparently, who is on the side of good or bad, who is on the outside or the inside, depends on which side you're standing on. Today's parable is a story about who we are, a sheep or a goat, based upon what we do; how we treat the most vulnerable around us. God isn't neutral on the topic either. In fact, God has some very strong opinions on the importance of taking care of the hungry, the sick, the unclothed, the unsheltered and imprisoned. The problem for us is how best to do just that, how do we train our vision to see those in need and then how do we help meet their needs? Sometimes it comes down to the environment we find ourselves in; the families we were born into, the education we received, the communities where we live, the jobs we perform, even the churches we attend. Put simply, it is like the little boy who goes to his grandparents' house on the weekends and has a particularly sound night of sleep. He jumps out of bed and runs into the kitchen proclaiming to his grandparents, "It doesn't take near as long to sleep all night at your house as it does mine!" The lines get blurred based on our perspectives; our vision grows skewed based on where, when, and how we hang our hats at the end of the day. It can be really hard to determine who are the goats and who are the sheep within human history. Apparently, Charlie Chaplin once came in fourth in a Charlie Chaplin look-alike contest. Fred Craddock asks, "In such a world, who is innocent and who is guilty? Who is right and who is wrong? Certainly no one is completely innocent and under the dim lamps of appearance and deception, we compare ourselves with one another and come away with passing marks. After all, when we grade ourselves on the curve, everyone gets through the course. But it is a weary business and we get tired of it. There's no future in dreaming of exquisite palaces and ornate patios when the real truth is the roof leaks

and the rent is due.” We have all heard the old adage, when one door closes, another opens, but Helen Keller reminds us that when we look so long at the closed door, then we don’t see the one which has just been opened for us. Maybe that is one of the reasons it is really a good thing that it is Christ and not us who does the final judging. All our judgments are biased and it is hard to be sure who are the outsiders and insiders, because honestly, I’ve yet to see a goat who didn’t sometimes look like a sheep. There is a bad jingle that makes a good point: “There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly becomes any of us to talk about the rest of us.” I confess I need this reminder on a regular basis.

The art of living is to remember that human judgments are both temporary and conditional. But God’s judgment comes down to one question: How did you respond to human need? That’s it and it is rather surprising. Whether we are sheep or goats or somewhere in between, no matter the perspective that has led us to this point, it is the question that comes to us all. You may not find it surprising, but I do. I’m surprised because listening to others who are fairly deep into religion these days, they seem to believe some other question might be the main question. The religious air is filled with questions about the end of the world, spiritual gifts, visitors from other planets, being a Christian versus something else, but none of that plays out in God’s final and ultimate question. When everything is over and the streets have been rolled up, when all the switches have been thrown, when everything we have been doing has been done for the last time, the Creator and Judge will call you and me to account with one question, “How did you respond to human need?” May we find ourselves humbly and joyfully surprised by the answer.