Matthew 25: 31-46 "Our Response to Human Need" Rev. Janet Chapman 11/15/20

Jesus' parable today has us asking are we like the sheep or the goats? But is that really all there is to it? Some of us get discouraged if we read or hear a scripture and the meaning is not immediately clear or understandable to us. The problem is not simply that the Bible was originally written in another language, in another culture, and very long ago. That distance has to be negotiated but there is also this problem within the Protestant tradition that we have boasted that anyone can read the Bible and understand it. That simply is not true. It is kind of like the story of the rich merchant who treated a poor old man with rudeness and disdain while the two were traveling together on a train. When they arrived at their common destination, the merchant found the station overflowing with adoring and faithful people waiting in ecstatic joy to greet one of the holiest and wisest faith leaders in all the world. The merchant suddenly realized to his chagrin that the poor old man riding in his compartment was that saintly teacher. Embarrassed at his disgraceful behavior and distraught that he had missed a golden opportunity to speak in privacy with this one who had been named by Time as one of the most influential faith leaders of this generation, he pushed his way through the crowd to find the old man. When he reached the man, he begged his forgiveness and requested his blessing. He was caught off guard when the teacher replied, "I cannot forgive you. To receive forgiveness you must go out and beg it from every poor old man in the world." Not what we would have expected but closer to the truth than we care to admit.

Such happens in the reading of the Bible and Dr. Fred Craddock supposes that might be due to the drying up of the life of the imagination. In our culture that pursues facts and information, certainly a very needed pursuit, it is true that the rich imagery of the Bible sounds

unbelievably alien. However, for Bible writers the imagination is the home of faith. For a modern mind, imagination is the home of the fanciful, the untrue, the naively and childishly false. But for biblical writers, they seem to indicate that when imagination is built upon fear, it becomes a conspiracy theory; when imagination is built upon love, it becomes gospel – a very clear distinction to some, but to others often confused as one and the same. The image before us in the parable is central to the Bible's understanding of life in history. The scene is the final one as the Bible conveys that unwavering conviction that history and human life have direction and purpose. Life and history are not based on chance or accident, nor is life a cycle of repetition or an endless return of the same old thing. There was a genesis of all life; there will be an end to all life. The kind of storytelling here was not meant to provide details or a diagram about when, or how, the end of time would come. It was, instead, an ethical instruction that Jesus gave so that his followers will know what is really important to God. The story of the sheep and the goats is meant not to frighten but to comfort and assure us that the inequities that have been experienced in life will be made right, justice will ultimately be established as the governing principle of God's world. It is, therefore, no wonder that early Christians prayed the prayer that seems so strange to some of us, the prayer that said simply, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Matthew places this grand image at the close of Jesus' public ministry almost like a climatic ending. That very location makes us think Matthew wants to underscore it, as though he were saying, "If you forget the other things he did and said, please remember Jesus' final message." What is that final message? Are we sure it is just about some stubborn goats that talk back and some sheep who don't? The placement of the story to its earliest readers and therefore to us says more – it is how it shall be when life ceases, it is how it will be when history

ends and every person is openly and clearly seen under that light which makes no shadow. Victor Hugo's masterpiece, Les Miserables, introduces us to one of my favorite literary models of Jesus, Bishop Welcome. Bishop Welcome is given this nickname by his people in honor of his gracious hospitality. When he arrives at the episcopal palace which will be the parsonage for him while serving the local church, he says, "…There is evidently a mistake here." You see, the episcopal palace sat next to a tiny, cramped single story hospital. So Bishop Welcome tells the hospital staff who has come next door to greet him, "There are 36 of you in 5-6 small rooms. There are 3 of us here, and we have room for 60. There is some mistake, I tell you; (you must) have my house, and I will have yours. Give me back my house; you are already at home here." The switch is made; the episcopal palace becomes a hospital for God's sick sheep but Bishop Welcome spends little time in his new small residence. He decides to be out in the community visiting people of the parish, attending community gatherings, and connecting with strangers. The mayor of the town begs him not to go into the dangerous parts of the region risking his life in the midst of a "flock of wolves," but Bishop Welcome responds that perhaps Jesus has asked him to shepherd this flock of wolves and that they too need to be "told of a good and loving God." He added, "I am not in the world to guard my own life, but to guard souls." Bishop Welcome makes it to the most remote parts of the region and the people greet him warmly and with joy. The community is even caught off guard when the so-called thieves and robbers bring to the Bishop a box of priceless ornaments and vestments to be used for ministry and suddenly, it is hard to tell who are the sheep and who are the goats.

But as you might begin to suspect, there is more to it. According to this text, there is an eternity of difference in people. But by what standard is that difference measured? Is there

something more concrete that Matthew wants us to grasp when hearing this story? You might be surprised like I was regarding what Craddock names as the one essential question by which all are measured. It turns out that those indicators regarding the end of all life and what will occur do not revolve around plagues and pandemics, hurricanes and fire-nadoes, visitors from other planets, heaven, hell, and unusual gifts of the Spirit. The main question God considers as the ultimate pinnacle for measurement has nothing to do with all those things. Instead we are told the one final question which matters the most to God and should be enough to consume our interest, energies and concerns, and that is, "How did you respond to human need?" That's it. That is the question. "I was alone. I had no one in the world. My husband died, my children lived in another state but I stayed in that big empty house. Did you or did you not come?" "I was in prison, cut off from society for my mistakes. A criminal, yes, but still a human being. Did you or did you not visit? Did you send me a card or note?" "I was hungry, peering into a world of banquets and diets. I saw more food flushed down disposals than my entire family had eaten. Did you offer me anything to eat?" "I was without clothing, looking into the shop windows, gazing at the wardrobes of the world. I waited for styles to change hoping for an old coat or dress. Did you offer me anything to wear?" "I was a stranger, new at the job, new in the city, new on the street, new in the neighborhood, new in the apartment building. I did not know a soul. Did you introduce yourself to me?" 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 the world to account with one question, "How did you respond to human need?" 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.