

Matthew 25:31-40

"This is what Jesus said: 'When Did I See You?'"

3rd of 3 Stewardship Series ~ Pledge Dedication Sunday ~ Receiving New Members

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Introduction

Today, we have reached the edge. We are at the very last of our gospel lessons from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Let us listen for what God is saying to the church today in this 3rd of three parables. Last week we had the one about the 10 bridesmaids, we skipped the one about the Talents, and today we get the one about the sheep and the goats. Jesus told these three parables in rapid succession to his 12 disciples in answer to their question about the what and the when, of his Second Coming. Keep in mind that in the larger arc of Matthew's whole gospel, this is Jesus' absolutely final teaching before Judas would betray him and he would be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, two days later.

Sermon

Is anyone wondering what season we're in here on Nov. 19, 2023? That's easy, preacher who-is-not-from-Wisconsin: it's the second day of gun deer season! Others of you (*many* others) may say it's NFL high season: our Green Bay Packers still have 8 games left to win and today's game against the LA Chargers kicks off at noon, so... move it along, preacher. And then there's Thanksgiving that's coming down the pike in four days! Surely, we have travel plans, cooking plans, lists of what *to do* before the big day, and *topics to avoid* at your Thanksgiving table. A cacophony of seasonal thoughts flying around this sanctuary right now. And in your homes, or cars, or wherever you, beloved community of remote worshippers, may be worshipping.

But that's not all: yes, of course: Christmas is coming!! If you do *any* shopping in actual stores or online, you may be thinking, "My God, preacher, Christmas season started back even before Halloween. Apparently, this year "*Pre Black Friday*" sales are now a thing? Frankly.... I'm kind of surprised to see you all here when you could be getting those deals that just might be gone if you wait too long, (Okay, I can see you grabbing your phones for a quick one click purchase you forgot to make). And just to add to our seasonal dysphoria, what's up with this weirdly warm weather, deep into November? We have lived in Wisconsin long enough to know that this is not normal. This weather is *unseasonably* warm.

What season are we really in, anyway? Yes, it is also what we call in church land "stewardship season" and today is Pledge Dedication Sunday, which means it is the culmination of our "Stewardship campaign." You may have noticed the banner in our Fellowship Hall/Gym that says, "Stewardship is a lifestyle." To which I say, "True that!" Yet, I will rephrase it, bringing it into the harmonic cadence of Matthew 25 by saying: "Compassion, Grace, and Solidarity, whenever, wherever. Jesus' call to stand side-by-side in relationship with the marginalized: This is our life practice, for *all* seasons."

Jesus gives us a great gift in this final parable. He is telling us that God is more concerned about *relationship* than religion. Jesus cares more about what we do or don't do in relationship with, than what we say we believe or don't believe. The gift of this final parable from Jesus in Matthew is the way he breaks this teaching down into something we can see. Something we can choose to follow or not to follow. "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." *Elachistoi* – translated as "the least of these" literally means *the smallest or most insignificant* – the "expendables." You want to see Jesus? Extend compassion, mercy, solidarity to one vulnerable person. Be an ally for people others see as "expendable" or don't even see at all. Not in a way that registers them as beloved children of God. That's right. And here's the wild and crazy thing: whenever we actually do this, we see Jesus! And Christ rises again.

Have you ever heard that the word hope, stands for: **Hold On, Pain Ends**: "H. O. P. E." We live in a world of hurt, beloved community. Hurt that Jesus chose to experience firsthand. Pain he chose to take on, not only on the Friday the sky went black at noon. The day he was crucified—just three days after he told his disciples this parable. But every day, every moment a person suffers on this earth. If you are in pain at this moment, hear this from Jesus, "Hold On, Pain Ends." If you want to see Jesus, let us open our eyes to the pain in our world and extend whatever act of compassion and mercy we can do. One day you may be the person who needs to be reminded to HOPE. Another day, you will be the person extending that tiny beam of light. You will be Christ for a person in pain. The relationship that helps them hold on.

In verse 45 of this parable Jesus plainly tells his disciples that the reverse is also true, "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." Friends, today, let us commit to being people who no longer seek to be right, but instead to get down to the practical work of our own transformation and the transformation of the world's suffering. One person, one relationship, one injustice at a time. Not just for a week, or a season. To be Christ followers mean to be committed every day of every season of every year.

To be repairers of the breach takes time, patience, planning, money, staying power. Dan Burk will share in his MFS some specifics about how we do that here. When we walk forward with our pledges today, whatever the amount, or if we check the box "other" without a specific amount, we are pledging ourselves perhaps to begin, or to remain on Jesus' Matthew 25 mission of mercy and love, solidarity and restorative justice for all creation. Let this little orange card stand for our pledge of the heart to stay with every season, we are given to live on this earth.

"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me." (v. 35b) When you see a stranger, do you see Christ? I want to share a story with you from Valarie Kaur's book titled, *See No Stranger*.¹ Two different small groups have been reading and discussing this important book, which I highly recommend. In this book she shares her own experience of the Oak Creek Mass Shooting that happened on a Saturday morning, August 5, back in 2012. where forty people had gathered inside the gurdwara (Sikh temple) to prepare for the day's services which left seven worshipers dead. You may or may not remember it. This one happened here in Wisconsin: Oak Creek is a

suburb of Milwaukee on the southern edge of Milwaukee County. There have been so many mass shootings it is hard to keep track.

Today, in fact, is the one-year anniversary of the Club Q shooting at an LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs. And it seems the more often they happen, the more quickly the window closes on the national attention it receives or action that is taken in response. Something else comes along and we quickly move on. The Oak Creek mass shooting, the opportunity it opened to have a national conversation about hate and white nationalism, in this case against Sikhs, end in less than a week because it happened mid-presidential election season. Welcoming or not welcoming those who seem different to us, can have deadly, lethal consequences, not only to those whose lives are literally cut short. But to all of us, spiritually, as well. Jesus weeps, and what do we do? Or not do.

As Valarie Kaur has written, "You may say: *It's too much—all this grief, all this violence and injustice, it's too hard.* You are right. The mind can comprehend one death, but it cannot comprehend thousands, especially when one's own community, nation, or ancestors played some part in causing the death. Mother Teresa once said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."ⁱⁱⁱ

I think Valarie and Mother Teresa got these ideas from Jesus. Perhaps from this parable in Matthew 25 when Jesus clearly said, "one of the least of these." Friends, the season of compassion is every day of our one wild and precious life, as poet Mary Oliver memorably wrote. Our call to act, to see one person and do one thing, take one step toward restorative justice for the least of these, never ends. As another favorite poet of mine, Joy Harjo, member of the Muskogee nation has written, "All acts of kindness are light in the war for justice." Perhaps you will be that beam of light for one person, today.

Your pledge alone will not end the war between Israel and Hamas, or the war in Ukraine; your pledge alone will not end gun violence, or reverse the damage of climate change, or solve the mental health crisis across our country. But together, in a way, it could help move us that much closer. Your commitment, your will, to enter and stay in relationship with "the least of these" around and within us, is our HOPE.

Did you know, that for Christ followers, every Sunday is a little Easter? We are Easter people every day God gives us. I believe that as we walk forward at the end of our worship today (in body or in spirit) to offer our pledges, not only of dollars but also of our days and nights, of our deliberate acts of compassion and justice, we are saying "yes" to being a part of what Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian theologian, philosopher and former Catholic priest, has described as the "The Resurrection Process." What he describes is our call today, whatever season we choose to celebrate. Here it is:

*God penetrates the entire cosmos
pervades the whole world,
and makes that presence felt in every human being.*

*The resurrection is a process that began at the dawn of humanity
and will go on until it embraces all creation.*

*wherever an authentically human life is growing in the world,
wherever justice is triumphing over the instincts of domination,
wherever grace is winning out of the power of sin,
wherever human beings are creating more
community in their social life together
Wherever love is getting the better of selfish interests
and wherever hope is resisting the lure of cynicism or despair,
there the process of resurrection is being turned into a reality.*

Wherever and whenever we participate in this relational process, Jesus will say, "Yes, I see you, fulfilling your purpose, from the foundation of the world." Amen.

ⁱ Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, (New York, NY: One World/Random House, 2021), pp. 217-243.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 59