

“Would You See Him?” Matthew 25: 31-46 Allison Creek Pres. Ch.
August 3, 2014

Our NT reading this morning is a familiar passage. When something is familiar, you and I know what to expect. Just like you know what to expect (1) when we sing the words to the doxology “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” or (2) we know what to expect when we order chili from Wendys or (3) we know what a Big Mac or an Egg McMuffin is going to taste like, or (4) we know what to expect when we drive down the same familiar road each day. The problem with “familiar” is that we are on automatic pilot when we do familiar things or eat something familiar or hear something familiar. While familiarity makes things predictable, it reduces the chance of our encountering new things. And it leaves us separated from our God who is “making all things new.” We just heard in Isaiah 43: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old; for I am about to do a new thing...”

I noticed a couple of new things this past week in our Matthew 25 reading. In a minute, you are going to hear that the Son of Man is coming to judge both the people of the world and Christians in particular. Jesus will use an image that Palestinian Jews would have known of separating sheep and goats at the end of the day... primarily to protect the goats that would have needed shelter at night from the cold. Sheep were more valuable commercially so they would have gone over to the preferred right side and the goats would have been directed to the left.

So there in front of the nations of the world sits the God King Jesus—pointing to the left those who are dead to life and pointing to the right those who find life.

So what are the criteria used by the God King Jesus for Christians and for the people of the world who are about to be judged? You will hear the criteria for salvation listed four times—almost word for word in each refrain.

Listen for God’s word to you....

“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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and

he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And 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.' Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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.' Then 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?' Then 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.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the

righteous into eternal life.” This is the word of the Lord.

Isn't it strange how each group—those on the left and those on the right—that neither group recognized Jesus when he was in front of them? When they learned the criteria for salvation-- both said to him: “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?” He was an anonymous figure among the forgotten and marginated people. But it was those who had reached out to the forgotten and marginated people in need—without even seeing the physical Jesus—who at the end of the day were given life.

We live in a historical period when the forgotten and marginated are unseen and are being bypassed. And it is easy for all of us caught up in familiar routines—our jobs, our health problems, our families and our projects, constantly problem solving this and that—to miss the suffering of those around us. Our routines keep poverty and human need in our community at a distance. We do not even know it is there.

My wife, Kay, who has taught at York Comprehensive High School for 32 years, was in a meeting with school administrators two weeks ago interviewing teachers for this fall. She learned in that meeting that this year that 67% of the children in the entire York School District are eligible for free and reduced meals. Do all the kids sign up for it? No. It is embarrassing to many parents and students and they do not take advantage of it; but thank goodness the meal is there for those who come to school hungry every day. Those unseen children are sitting beside those of you who are in school, they are sitting beside our children and grandchildren who are attending school—and that is over 2/3's of the parents in McConnells, Hickory Grove, Sharon, Smyrna and York—who do not have the resources to adequately feed their children. But if you are like me—you and I do not think about these kids, we do not recognize them as being food insecure—we do not see them.

I think there is a deeper spiritual reason that we do not see these students and people in need. And that is that people in need are more vulnerable. If we look at other people in their deepest need—poor, hungry, smelly, sick, less educated—some of us are repulsed because they touch our own vulnerability. We are supposed to be strong and on top of things in our families, work places, and in front of

our children and grandchildren. But if we are sick, we may not be on top of things and need others to help us. If we suddenly lose our jobs or our retirement, we are vulnerable. If we are struggling with cancer or another disease, we are vulnerable. If we have been incarcerated or have a relative in prison, we are vulnerable to shame. If we do not have the money to buy new clothes for our children to go to school this fall, we feel bad. Seeing, smelling, being close to people who are poor or sick—touches our own vulnerability.

In August of 2011, we were having our Dimes for Hunger Kick-Off supper where we invited the directors of feeding programs that your dimes support. I sat at a table with the director of an agency in an affluent part of our county who told me about a family that had helped her agency with donations for many years. There was a husband and wife and two children, both parents worked in large businesses in Charlotte, and both had lost their jobs in mid 2009 with the downturn in our economy. One of the spouses became ill after their COBRA insurance ran out, they were a number of payments behind with their house, and they stopped going to their church where both had been officers. They could not make their pledge. During the summer before our supper, the wife in this family walked into this agency NOT to make a donation to the director---but to ask for help since they were losing their home.

All of us are vulnerable. At any moment in time, what we have, what is familiar, what we expect to have in the future, what is secure--can be taken away. And at those times we are reminded that--like 2/3's of the school children----we are also vulnerable...so many of us turn away so we do not have to see "the least of these" who are living what could happen to us.

One of the ways this congregation and the other churches in our presbytery have recognized the presence of Jesus in "the least of these" is through our Dimes for Hunger program. Over the years you have provided home delivered meals 5 days a week in the five counties. You currently serve 380 meals a week in two soup kitchens, and you stock nine food pantries. And your dimes feed families through Heifer projects in Honduras and Guatemala and you help provide 2000 lunches a month in Malawi Africa to orphans—many of whom have lost parents to AIDS or the moms and dads have died from wars and genocide in neighboring countries.

And from the encounters some of you have had traveling to Central America, or volunteering to take home delivered meals to the

housebound, or helping with York Path, HOPE, the Fort Mill Caring Center and the Clover Area Assistance Center you have encountered Christ—in the faces of the least of these.

This year, with your help, Dimes for Hunger total contributions since we began should reach one and a half million dollars. Allison Creek has been very generous over the years. And not a dime of what has been collected has been used for administrative costs. Every dime has fed someone.

My hope is that you will send representatives from your church to our kickoff meal on Sunday the 17th at Oakland Presbyterian so you can hear from the recent travellers to CA and the needs of “the least of these” in our area.

Please continue to be the church that is reaching out to Christ with your dimes. AMEN