

Who Do You See?: The Final Exam

Matthew 25:31-46

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November 20, 2011

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Here we are,

at the end of another year.

Next week the cycle of the Christian Year

begins again with the first Sunday of Advent.

So today is the very the last Sunday of the season of Pentecost

(also known as Ordinary Time),

the last Sunday of the season when we hear the teachings of Jesus

so that we can put them into practice in our daily lives.

And, like a benevolent teacher,

Jesus gives us the question that will be on the final exam!

First, he gives us a bit of context to remind us that this is not a quiz.

It's a final exam!

Jesus says,

“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.”

This is where we tend to get stuck.

We tend to think Jesus is talking about “who’s in” and “who’s out,”
who is “us” and who is “them.”

When we think that way, we’ve missed the mark,

we’ve fallen asleep,

we’ve forget what Jesus has been telling us week after week.

about God,

and about being children of God.

Jesus has been telling us parables,

all summer and fall,

to wake us up!

In parable after parable,

we discover

Jesus is not talking about “them” –

Jesus is talking about US . . .

Remember the parable of the vineyard,

and the workers the owner hires late in the day . . .

What was Jesus teaching us about the reign of God?

Jesus was reminding us
that God is generous
and that God values each person equally,
no matter when he or she came into the vineyard
No one is worth more than anyone else.

And what was Jesus telling us about ourselves?

He was reminding us that we really don't like God's generosity.
It is so very hard for us to understand that God does not work the way the world does.
God does not value persons or time or work
as the world does,
God does not value persons or time or work
as we actually do . . .
God values the least, the weakest, the poorest, the failed
as much, or more,
as the greatest, the strong, the wealthiest
and the successful

If we are truthful,
we believe we deserve more
because we have worked longer and harder
and are better at being Christian.
On some level
we believe that success and wealth is a reward
for being good and faithful.
We really don't believe that those who have "failed"
are as deserving as we are;
we look down on them.
Of course, when we think this,
we fall right into the trap
of comparing ourselves with others!
We are caught in our envy and righteousness,
as we put others down
in an attempt to prove our own value.

The truth is,
we really do not have an inkling of the inner lives of anyone other than ourselves,
and we do not know anyone's full history
and the depth of their pain and suffering.
We do not really know their relationship with God.
The only person we really know anything about is ourselves.
And the only relationship with God that we're in charge of
is our own.
And that's enough work for a lifetime!
So it's not up to any of us
to judge another's life
or faithfulness
or goodness. Ever.

We are not the judge.
God is.
And, as Mother Teresa would remind us:
“In the end, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.”

In parable after parable,
we discover
Jesus is not talking about “them” –
Jesus is actually talking about US . . .

Jesus uses parables
to remind us we each have to choose where our life is centered,
We can live within the world’s point of view
and say “yes”
to living according to the world’s standards
that promote success as the sign of God’s favor
or
We can live within God’s point of view
and say “yes”
to living according to God’s standards
that recognize everyone
whoever and however they are
as our beloved brothers and sisters
in God.

The early church put the choice as “Caesar is Lord” or “Jesus is Lord.”
One or the other.
Just as we cannot serve two masters,
we cannot serve two gods or two powers.
We can only have one ultimate allegiance.

And, as the parables we heard this summer remind us,
Jesus is not talking about “them” –
Jesus is not talking about the choices other people make . . .
Jesus is talking about US –
and the choices we make –
because the only choices we have any control over are our own.
We have no control over anyone else.

And, there is no way to love God
and be in relationship with God
except by loving our neighbor and the stranger.
As you know, this requirement to love
is the fundamental principle of both Judaism and Christianity.
And the Hebrew word for what we call “commandments”

actually means,
 “ways to be like God”
 or
 “ways to be holy.”
These are the ways we grow
 into our fullness
 as persons made in the image and likeness of God.

So, once again, this isn't about “them”
 this is about US!
 This is about how we are being changed
 to become more and more like God.
God wants to have that inner connection with us,
 that kind of relationship with us –
 the kind in which we hear God say:
 “My light is your light
 and your light is My light,
 let us go together – you and I –
 and give light to [the world].”

All summer and fall,
 through the Gospel of Matthew,
 we've been given Jesus' teachings.
 These are world-changing, explosive, teachings.
They're not “practical” according to the “real” world,
 so we get frightened.
 We're afraid that following these teachings
 will make our life difficult.
And we're right to be scared,
 because this really is risk capital Jesus has given to us.
 And there's no way to make a difference for the reign of God
 unless we get down to business
 and live out these teachings
 in our everyday life, here and now.

So Jesus tells us what will be on that final exam:
 “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.’”

This is what living as God's children looks like.

There's no paperwork required before we act.

None.

There's no requirement that people meet our standards
or even God's standards.

None.

The only requirement
is being in need.

Jesus simply says,

you gave me food,
you gave me something to drink,
you welcomed me,
you gave me clothing,
you took care of me,
you visited me.'"

How we would treat Jesus

is the litmus test for how we love anyone in need,
both neighbors and strangers,
all the time.

It's that simple.

It's that difficult.

This is what loving God looks like.

Jesus tells us exactly how to pass the final exam:

"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.'

When we are in right-relationship with God

(this is being "righteous")

this is what our everyday lives look like.

We treat anyone in need –

anyone –

no matter what we think of them,
exactly as we would treat Jesus.

This is what it takes to pass the final exam.

We fail the exam,

and miss the point of Jesus' teaching,
when we treat someone in need
in any way differently than we would treat Jesus.

We fail the exam,
and miss the point of Jesus' teaching,
when we succumb to the "real world's" way of doing things
and treat some people better than others.

We fail the exam,
when we require people meet our standards
or even God's standards.

Because this exam
is not about them;
It's about us,
and "our actions, reactions, and inactions."*
They're not being tested,
we are!

And Jesus explains the cost of failing this exam:
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."

Or to put it simply:
"you gave me no food,
you gave me nothing to drink,
you did not welcome me,
you did not give me clothing,
you did not visit me . . .
just as you did not do it to one of the least of these
you did not do it to me."

This failure to act is enough to drive us out of the presence of God.

Really.

This failure to act is enough to drive us out of the presence of God.

There is no excuse.

We've taken the course.

We know Jesus' teachings.

Like all exams,

it's not about what others did or did not do,

it's about how WE choose to act and what WE do

right here and now,

because this is about our relationship with God.

The good news is: There are study guides for the exam!

To see others as Christ does,

and to treat others like we would treat Christ,

it helps to act like Christ.

One of these guides comes from the wonderful 14th century Christian,

Teresa of Avila.

She gave us this prayer to help us live into our call as Christians:

Lord Christ,

You have no body on earth but ours,

No hands but ours,

No feet but ours.

Ours are the eyes through which your compassion

Must look out on the world.

Ours are the feet by which you may still

Go about doing good.

Ours are the hands with which

You bless people now.

Bless our minds and bodies,

That we may be a blessing to others.

AMEN

Sources:

*Maya Angelou in a talk in Berkeley, CA 1987

Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation by Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos

Gospel Light from Aramaic on the Teachings of Jesus by George Lamsa

Sermons preached at Edgewood UMC, July through November, 2011

Texts:

Matthew 25:31-46

“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.”