

# Last Things

Matthew 25:31-46

Last Things.

In this last month of the Christian year, the church year, we have been listening to Jesus' parables about the last times, and his last acts. How are we to regard our gifts, in the parable of the Talents. How we are to regard religious leaders, the Pharisees, doing what they say but not what they do. How we are to be ready for the bridegroom, with our lamps trimmed and burning.

And today, in another parable, Jesus pulls out all the stops. The Human One will come with all his angels and in all his glory, and the nations will be arrayed before him. He will separate the sheep from the goats, and the sheep will go to eternal joy, and the goats to eternal fire. Again, this is a picture meant to make one large point, not a detailed description of what happens when we die! And here in his last speech in Matthew's gospel, Jesus calls to account, not individuals—or at least not just individuals—but, the nations. The gentiles, the *ethnos*.

So, before we launch next week into the season of waiting for the Prince of Peace to be born once more, the season of eager expectation that God has come and will come to dwell among us, full of grace and

truth; we pause long enough to look the end times straight in the eye. And why would we do that? So that before those end times come, we may be turned upside down, turned around, sent out again, re-confirmed, humbled, made ready.

The last things Jesus tells his disciples and the crowd are that the Human One— what “son of man” means, though really it would be more accurate to say “son of woman,” since that is one thing all faiths affirm about Jesus, that he was born of a woman—the last thing he presents is this picture of the last judgement.

Come, you blessed of my Father, he says, for when I was hungry you fed me, thirsty and you gave me to drink, naked and you clothed me, sick and in prison and you visited me.

But Lord, when did we do that? When did we see you in that state?

Ah, whenever you did it to the least of these, the littlest ones, the ones with no status, no wealth, no station in society, you did it to me.

And of course Jesus then turns to the others—the other nations, remember, in this parable—and says, go to the outer darkness, you accursed, for when I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison, you did not come to me. But when did we see you in those states of poverty of mind, body, spirit, freedom? Ah, whenever you did NOT do it to the least of these, **MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS**, you did not do it to me.

That declaration always brings to me a great sigh. I immediately begin to count what I have and have not done and try to imagine, am I a sheep or a goat?

But the other great and surprising thing is, neither the ones who DID right by the least, last and lost, nor the ones who did NOT do right, recognized that they were serving Jesus. Neither recognized God when God appeared in their neediest citizens.

So perhaps the last thing Jesus wants his hearers to remember, is that God continues to come to us in the ones with the least status, the least to eat, the least freedom, the least agency in society. God continues to speak to us in these neighbors, whom Jesus regards as his brothers and sisters. So we should too. The last thing Jesus leaves with his followers before he begins to descend the slippery slope to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die, is this picture of how God comes to us.

Last things.

Now, today is my last Sunday as your supply pastor. I bring with me to the pulpit, as you know, not only my 25 years' experience in parish ministry, but my 14 years as associate conference minister in New York State, where I helped churches and pastors find one another. Part of my job was to find trained interim ministers to help churches through the transition time to a new called pastor. And the longer your previous pastor was here, the more you need a substantial interim time. Everyone needs to get used to a different face in the pulpit, a different style of

leadership, so you can be truly ready to call a new partner in ministry to stay a long while.

Good Shepherd is very fortunate that next week, your interim pastor, Pastor Janet, will begin her work with you. She brings the skills and experience to guide you, and she knows all about the new congregational profile you will get to assemble as you assess yourself.

I urge you and encourage you, as one of my last things, to see this time of transition NOT as a time that the church is broken and you need to hurry up and fix it. It is a time of taking careful stock, reviewing the past, and finding ways to look toward a future that will be different.

You already know some of the ways that church is different in this generation than the last, and that is not going to change. Sports teams are going to play on Sundays, children are going to spend time on their phones and electric games, families no longer come to church just because they're supposed to or because their parents did. This is lamentable. But it's not really changeable.

What has not changed is that there are families out there, and people of all ages, who are yearning for an encounter with God. Some of them will find their way through your doors. What you can offer them is meaningful worship, warm greetings, genuine friendship, and leadership that does not assume that they know what church is. I urge and encourage you always to assume that there is someone in your pews who has no idea why we read three different scriptures every Sunday, and what those three different parts of the Bible are. There will be some one

who does NOT know your name, so you can get in the habit of overcoming your shyness and introducing yourselves to them. Then—sit with them in church and invite them to coffee hour! (Yes, you should have them, after church, frequently, and perhaps even right in the narthex. Stop worrying about the carpet. Extravagant welcome of newcomers is more important.)

It would even be wonderful if your ushers and greeters wore name tags. Every Sunday. And asked people their names in return.

There are other simple things about hospitality that Pastor Janet can take up with you. I will offer one more idea in my last things list. Try to let go of making a list of what you want in a new pastor. Of course you want someone who is an engaging preacher, a good leader and a compassionate visitor. You can take that for granted. Think instead about what kind of disciples you want to make. Disciples who are grounded in scripture? Who are aware of the “least of these” neighbors and eager to serve them in Jesus’ name? Who are willing to invite not just individuals but our county, our state, our nation, to treat the lowest in society with compassion and justice? What kind of disciples do you want to be forming? Then, look at your pastoral candidates for the person who can be your most effective partner in such spiritual and social formation.

My observation about Good Shepherd is that you have a deep well of gifts, a lot of energy, a venerable history, and a fine and accessible new building. You have a long track record of helping your neighbors, in the

list in the bulletin every week, and lots of other ways. Thanks be to God for your faithfulness.

So do not be afraid. My last words to you are, take heart. God has a bright future in mind for you. And my last thoughts about today's parable are these: in the musical Godspell, Jesus and his disciples act out this parable as we did the parable of the talents last week. Jesus lines up the two groups before him, congratulates the sheep, and scolds the goats. Then he smilingly motions the sheep to follow him around one side of the wall, and the disciples who are being the sheep, blithely crawl on all fours after him, cavorting as they go. And Jesus sternly motions for the goats to leave, to go to the outer darkness on the other side of the wall. They hang their heads and crawl away. The stage remains empty for a minute. Then Jesus comes back around the wall, peers around the other side where the goats have gone, still looking behind them to see if there is hope. Jesus spies them, and crooks his finger to beckon them. Then the goats, too, follow him around the wall where the sheep have gone. Turns out, the last thing is: Everyone is invited into the Reign of Christ.

TBTG.