

Proper 29, Last Pentecost November 23, 2008

There is something terribly sad in that Gospel, something so easy to miss that it had completely eluded me until not very long ago. That's probably because this is such a tempting story. It is one of the most straightforward of all the New Testament's accounts of judgment; and one of the most fun. Here judgment is connected to actively reaching out to those in need, specifically to "the least of these", to those who are at the bottom, those who are the most helpless and who have no other champions; to those with no one else to care for them. These are God's favorites—the ones God sees in a special way.

And it's really clear that those who are condemned are not condemned for doing bad things, or for acting cruelly. Instead, they are condemned for the good they did not do. You can't sit out the Christian moral life. There's just no way, by avoiding engagement, to thereby avoid judgment. "Well, I never intentionally hurt anybody" cuts no mustard at the Great Throne Judgment.

All of which can tempt just about any preacher to shout, "So ya'all get out there and serve Jesus in your neighbor. Do good and save your soul from the judgment of eternal fire all at the same time." Which can make a heck of a sermon, and one I am not opposed to preaching from time to time. Can't hurt. At the same time, the story can also tempt this particular preacher to talk about how committed St. Nicholas' is to engaging this sort of ministry, what great opportunities for that are in front of us, and how all of this is no doubt pleasing to God. Which can also make a heck of a sermon, and another one I am not opposed to preaching from time to time. But, not to be led into temptation, and since we do have a deacon to help us hear those particular sermons, today I want to say something a little different.

I want to talk about what's so sad in this story—it's something I want you to pay special attention to. The sad part is something the saved say.

Notice that those who have been gathered up at the right hand of the Lord, those who are called blessed of the father, the ones *we* want to be; these folks have only one thing to say to Jesus. (Did you notice that?) They say, “Lord, when?” “When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?” When?” That’s it; that’s all they have to say.

This is dreadfully sad because of all the loss, and all the struggle, and all the pain that question implies. These folks, the sheep, the saved, the good guys, they were right, they did all of the correct things, *but they missed the greatest joy of it*. They missed seeing the Lord. They overlooked the hidden presence of God in the face of those they served.

I think one of the reasons we have this parable is to help us avoid that loss, to remind us what reaching out, and caring, and serving, are really all about. Because it’s very clear: no matter how right you are, no matter how much you serve the presence of Christ in others, if you don’t pay special attention, if you don’t look for the Lord Jesus in those you serve, then, like the saved in the parable, you won’t see him. And most of the joy is lost. Most of the joy of doing good and being right and saving your soul from the judgment of eternal fire all at the same time, all that joy, is lost.

After all, reaching out in love to the presence of Christ in others, especially in both “the least of these” and in those closest to us, this is quite often a great big pain. It takes a lot of time, and there’s almost never any indication that anything of lasting benefit has occurred.

What’s more, “the least of these” are usually *at the very least* partially responsible for whatever problems and needs make them the least. And most of the time they don’t look, or act, (or smell) the way we imagine Jesus would or should.

Frequently, they aren't very nice, and, worse yet, they seldom seem to appreciate whatever good we do try to do for them. So, doing good, reaching out to feed, clothe, visit, heal, and otherwise minister to "the least of these" tends to frustrate us, and we tend to get burned, and to get burned out. And much the same sort of thing can happen when the ones we reach out to are not some distant 'them', but instead are we, the people we live with and around, the close ones. One would think that actually serving Christ shouldn't be as hard, and as disheartening, as it often is.

But there we are. After all, just because we're doing something for religious reasons doesn't mean that, all by itself, whatever we're doing will look or feel religious, or that it will effect us in a particularly religious way.

Cleaning the kitchen in the church, or anywhere else for that matter, is still cleaning a kitchen. Being nice to a difficult person because you are convinced that Jesus wants you to, is still being nice to a difficult person. Spending time, or effort, or money out of Christian conviction still means that you no longer have that time, that money or that effort.

The Lord calls us to serve him, in our neighbors, in our brothers and sisters, in the least of these, and, sometimes the most challenging, in those closest to us. That call is real, there are no excuses. But the Lord *also* calls us to *see* him in the face of our neighbor, and our brother and sister, and, we can't forget, in the least of these. It is a spiritual call, a call to discernment, as well as a call to action.

There is not a secret or mysterious way to do this. Here are two quick ideas: First of all, in order to see the Lord, we have to look. At the people. Deliberately. All of the time. We need constantly to look—remembering what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what we hope to come from it. We need look on purpose.

Second, if we want Jesus to show himself to us, we need to ask him to. Sometimes we have to ask him a lot. That's one reason why any reaching out to others that is not wrapped in prayer, any act of ministry that is not consciously and deliberately offered to God with the request to be shown how the Lord is in it, any of these, while certainly not wasted, is terribly incomplete.

If our prayers during the day and about the day do not beg the Lord for a look at his face, or a glimpse at his kingdom, in all that is going on around us, then we are cheating ourselves, and living barely on the surface of a much deeper reality.

To try to live the life Christ calls us to live without placing all of that in the middle of some disciplined reflection, prayer and study, this is to risk missing the best part of it all.

It is to risk missing the presence and word of Jesus that can transform a task into an opportunity for joy, that can make doing the things we are called to do the route deeper into the mystery of God's life, and of our own.

This story of Judgment is more than a call to serve. It's more than a call to be good, and to do the right thing. Sure, it is that, but it's much more. It's also a call to look, to notice, to wrap our days and our lives in the search for the face of God in all that we do. It is a call, above all, to see.