



When No One is Watching

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Feast of Christ the King, November 26, 2017

Matthew 25:31-46, Proper 29A

How many of you have ever given money or food or help to someone who was clearly in need? How many of you have ever decided not to give money or food or help to someone who was clearly in need? The truth is that most of us have done both things. There are many times when we do help. We serve good organic indigenous food in the weekly community dinner at First Nations Kitchen in Minneapolis, which is happening this afternoon, by the way, in case any of you want to join in. We sometimes give money to people panhandling. We drop coins in Salvation Army buckets in response to people ringing bells outside grocery stores. We volunteer for VEAP, the Bloomington food shelf, and we buy things for the Giving Tree. We give used clothes to Goodwill. We've made donations to charitable organizations. We've made efforts to welcome strangers in our church and neighborhood and community. Perhaps some of us have done more than that – perhaps we've given the literal coat off our back, or started organizations that serve people in need, or adopted a child who was without parents.

But just as often, if we're honest, we say no to these things. We don't have any money or snacks in the car when we're stopped at the light and someone is panhandling, so we don't make eye contact with the person and drive past. A new family moves into the neighborhood, and they are from another country, and we neglect to make a special effort to welcome them. We hear that one in six children in the United States is living without consistent access to enough food, but we can hardly believe it and our lives are so busy anyway that even though we care in theory, in practice we experience that we don't have time to do much about it. So it appears that all of us are both sheep and goats. What are we to make of today's

teaching from Jesus? Aren't these social justice issues and not faith issues? But Jesus seems pretty clearly to make these things faith issues. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick – these things are what Jesus says separates those who are righteous and blessed by God, those who inherit the kingdom of God, and those who do not. How is it that in practice we are to deal with this teaching? Are we supposed to always say yes everytime someone asks us for help? What are we to do?

As with all scriptures when I am preparing to do a sermon, I pay attention to which detail jumps out at me the most, and this time it was the fact that both the sheep and the goats were surprised when the king passed judgment on them. We might have expected the wicked to be surprised. “Lord, when did we see you hungry and failed to give you food? When did we see you sick and failed to care for you? When were you in prison and did we fail to visit you?” It's natural to defend yourself, or try to wiggle out of it when you're in trouble, so we would expect these questions.

But what really stands out to me in this teaching is that the righteous are just as surprised as the wicked. They had no idea that when they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, visited the sick and those in prison, they were doing so to the king. They didn't recognize him either. If we all knew for sure that it was Jesus who we were encountering each time we came across someone who was in need that would probably change the way we acted, but in Jesus' teachings the righteous don't know this, and yet they care for those who are suffering anyway. And this seems to me to be the point worth exploring, and here's why.

What do people who are hungry, and thirsty, and sick, and naked, and strangers, and those in prison have in common, would you say? I would say that they have little or no power. We can treat them however we want to, including to ignore them, and get away with it, because they don't have power to resist or stand up for themselves or force us to help. I think Jesus is teaching us that it is the good we do when there is no reward, the mercy that pours out of us without calculation

when no one is watching, that is the mark of a true disciple. Do you remember the beatitudes, which are the beginning of Jesus' teachings in Matthew's gospel? The ones where Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven? Jesus also says, blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. I think this doesn't mean that they shall see God sometime. I think this means that for the pure in heart, everywhere they look they see God, and so they react with humility and kindness and a compassion that does not calculate either the reward or the cost. This is what it means to be righteous.

I have told you before that while I was in seminary, I volunteered every week at a day service center for young adults experiencing homelessness called Youthlink. My role there was just to listen. I got to know a young man nicknamed Panda, because he was shaped like a Panda bear and he had bushy black hair and he was quiet and gentle the way we imagine Panda bears to be. He also struggled with hygiene and basic social interaction, and had clearly been suffering a long time. I remember one time he asked if I could unlock the showers for him, so I got the key and took him downstairs. On the way we were chatting, and he mentioned how it really bothered him when the other young adults complained about the food at Youthlink, which happened fairly often. He said, "it's like they've never been hungry." I asked Panda, "Have you ever been hungry?" He said to me, "I grew up hungry."

His answer floored me. I wasn't talking to a child who grew up in a famine-stricken part of the world. I was talking to regular young person from Minnesota who grew up here. I wasn't talking to a statistic, but a human being who I knew personally and who I cared about, who has a name and a face and a story. What I choose to do with his answer is what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel. Can I follow Jesus to the places of the world's pain and show a joyful willingness to be compassionate without calculating the cost or the reward? This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It doesn't mean to follow the rules, or even to pour out our lives to make sure the community of St. Stephen's continues for generations to come, although we love St. Stephen's and do want it to continue. To be a disciple of Jesus means to be so transformed from the inside out that we joyfully journey

with Jesus to the cross, where the world's suffering is, and to overflow with care and compassion because this is where we find God already there ahead of us.

One of my teachers in seminary, Dirk Lange, had been a monk from the Taize monastery in France which our Friday Advent service music comes from. Taize monks deliberately spend half their time inside the monastery, and half their time outside it in places where the world is in need. He said this in response to today's scripture: "Rather than considering themselves holders or keepers of the mystery of God in their liturgy or works or piety, [Christians] discover that God is always already outside the circle they draw and the boundaries they create. . . the move outward [from our church and our building] is a move *towards* God!"¹

So the point is not to engage in debate over when or how often or how much we ought to help the needy or our neighbors or our children or the immigrant or refugees or criminals in prison, because that would be to get mired in analysis paralysis. The point is that the measure of a disciple of Jesus is what pours out of us when no one is watching, how we treat people we can get away with ignoring, what we do when there is no reward. And for this, we need inner transformation and softening and healing. We need to experience the beatitudes for ourselves, not as a description of good ethics, but as a personal journey of following the Jesus who makes true compassion possible.

¹ Dirk Lange, "Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46," November 23, 2008, on *Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=173, accessed November 26, 2017.