

From the Foundation of the World  
Matthew 25.31-46  
November 26, 2017  
Reign of Christ  
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I've forgotten now just how it started, but our Mission Action team decided a few years back to adopt these words from Matthew 25 as our guide for study, reflection, and service: "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." Blocking out a year or two for each emphasis, we have sat with a phrase at a time.

We began with hunger and its local and global effects, learning approximately 87,360 people in New Orleans are food insecure.<sup>1</sup> "Food insecurity is defined as the household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food," and, "26 percent of food insecure individuals in New Orleans were above the income threshold for eligibility for any federal nutrition program in 2014, [making] charitable responses...the only safety net for this group."<sup>2</sup> In addition to ongoing, annual support for Second Harvest Food Bank, our Food for Thought backpack program was born out of these months of reflection. We have watched that program grow as we deepen our relationship with the Audubon Charter School and work with them to identify families who need support over the weekends.

Next, we spent a year looking at water and the justice of who gets clean water and who doesn't, specifically considering the Flint, Michigan, water crisis which began in 2014. We also tackled the environmental reality of warming water around our globe, how the world's most vulnerable people will be impacted by that warming, and what drastic measures can be taken to respond to climate change. I think it is safe to say that this study felt so enormous in scope, need, and crisis that it did not feel actionable. We may need to circle back around to this phrase and consider again what the call to provide drink to the thirsty is for our community.

After a series of listening sessions across our congregation, we chose to skip ahead in the sequence to a comprehensive study of prison and what it means to be mindful of those who are incarcerated. Nearing the end of year two, we are still barely beginning

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers reflect 2014 study

<sup>2</sup> <https://datadriven.nola.gov/results/families/3-4/food-insecurity/>

to scratch the surface of the cultural impact of for-profit prisons and a criminal justice system that disproportionately tracks, condemns, and incarcerates people of color. We have discovered friendships along the way with the performers The Graduates, the organizers of Stand with Dignity, Kairos Prison Ministry, VOTE, Courtwatch NOLA, and an emerging relationship with the Peace and Justice staff of Catholic Charities.

It seems to me that our 2018 theme will guide us to consider what it means to welcome the stranger as many in our congregation have gotten involved in the Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition and the Congress of Day Laborers. With the leadership of Sara Broussard, we have begun hosting weekly Conversational English classes for all kinds of newcomers who are either polishing their English language skills or starting at the very beginning. Friends from area faith communities invited us into the very recent story of our neighbor Jose taking sanctuary at the First Grace United Methodist Church in Mid City, and we have been asked to host a January Teach-In on Immigration by the Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition, the Congress of Day Laborers, and the Jesuit Social Research Institute.

In 2017, we also became charter members of the Together New Orleans Sponsoring Committee, connecting us with dozens of faith communities around the city who are involved in similar work and advocacy. Together we have formed a coalition of power as we build the capacity to seek solutions to the issues facing our institutions, our neighborhoods, our families, our city, and the Greater New Orleans metropolitan area. Many of the congregations working in these other areas of caring for our neighbors have now formally partnered to advocate for our neighbors through partnerships with public officials who shape the policies that guide our city and state.

We are mindfully, actively living into these words of Jesus in caring for “the least of these” as he described. But the funny thing about this story is that Jesus wasn’t describing people who were mindfully living into these words. In fact, the sheep seem just as surprised as the goats when they discover they had been doing something right with the care and time they showed their neighbors.

The story itself is one that appears in other types of literature around the time of Jesus—how will humanity be judged, who will do the judging, how will people be separated by a divine figure into right and wrong, good and bad, saved and unsaved. That part is “fairly common in intertestamental apocalyptic literature,” as David Schnasa Jacobsen points out. “What stands out as unique,” he notes, “is the shared ignorance of the sheep and the goats: they seem surprised at their fate and were not aware whether

they had either neglected or responded to 'the least of these.' Most apocalyptic visions reveal (*apokalypto* = reveal); this one confounds both sheep and goat."<sup>3</sup>

Often, we read this text as judging "the nations" meaning all people everywhere of all time. However, this *ethnos* is Matthew's frequent term used for gentiles—those outside of Jewish and emerging Christian faith traditions. These are the unbelievers, and some have been active persecutors of Jesus and the people who follow him. Some. But not all. Within the nations are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner. Christopher Page observes, "The answer the parable offers is that persecuted Christians should view those 'unbelievers' who care for them as servants of Jesus. The flow of God's grace is not restricted to those we may identify as operating within the narrow confines of our identified group. God's grace crosses boundaries and is at work in surprising places."<sup>4</sup>

Matthew places this story of a king separating sheep from goats at the end of a string of parables that all have to do with the kingdom of God; parables depicting who grasps what God is about and who does not; parables explaining that much about God cannot be predicted, only experienced. Now Jesus describes people outside the faith traditions of his audience and names the care they show for neighbors as an effortless action rather than a deliberate action because of perceived reward. These people are in the flow of God even if they don't know God in the same way as his audience. They are filled with compassion for their neighbors just as Jesus was filled with compassion for the crowds he fed, for the people he healed; just as the father was filled with compassion for his prodigal son and saw him while he was still far off. When we are in the flow of God, the love and ways of God are flowing from us whether we recognize it or not.

In his commentary on Matthew 25, Greg Carey points to the work of "New Testament scholar Judy Stack-Nelson," who follows a pattern in Matthew on ethical behavior. Yes, doing what God desires does follow "Jesus' commands. But it does not result from effort, from trying hard. Instead, Matthew points out -- repeatedly -- that good fruit comes from good trees. John the Baptist warns of trees that fail to bear good fruit (3:10). Good trees, Jesus explains, cannot bear bad fruit, nor can bad trees bear good fruit (7:17-18). John and Jesus alike warn that the bad trees will be cast into the fire. Trees are known by their fruit (12:33). Likewise, good soil produces good fruit (13:23).

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3477](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3477)

<sup>4</sup> <https://inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/matthew-2531-46-the-surprising-kingdom-pt-1/>

...Matthew's Jesus does not instruct disciples that they should become the salt of the earth or the light of the world; he tells them they are such. Likewise, Jesus does not command his followers to hunger and thirst for justice, pursue peace, and so forth; he blesses those who do (5:1-16). Judgment simply brings out a reality that has been present all along."<sup>5</sup> From the foundation of the world.

This blessing doesn't have boundaries and isn't limited to a particular group of people, but the fruit of the tree or the result of the flow is apparent. Brian McLaren steps boldly into this teaching of the expansive ways of God in *The Great Spiritual Migration*, "Jesus welcomed doubters, skeptics, and questioners. He didn't turn them away. Neither should we. If Christian faith is...a way of life rather than merely a system of beliefs, then the key question is whether someone wants to live in the way of life Jesus taught and embodied. It becomes less a matter of what one believes and more a matter of how one believes ... and lives, and loves."<sup>6</sup>

The point of the story is NOT for us to perform certain acts of love and affection for our neighbors in the hopes of garnering favor with God. The story is telling us that being on the way of God may surprise us all, and will manifest particular actions because of the goodness and love of God moving through us. Just as the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives will produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, the path of Christ and the way of God will draw us to notice the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner, and the stranger in our midst. When we are on the way of God, we cannot help but notice and then act.

When we are talking about discernment here at St. Charles and asking how Spirit is moving as we look 5 and 10 and 20 years into the future, an amazing way to discern is looking for the pattern of where the fruit is growing. When are we most in the flow? Where do our passions intersect in our care not for ourselves but for our neighbors? Being on the way of Christ together will draw us deeper onto a way of compassion that surprises us, catches us off guard, pulls us out farther and farther than we expect. And it will not be until we end the near of our days that we look back and can hardly even remember. When was it that we loved God so closely and so well? When was it that we lived on the path of Christ so effortlessly and with great compassion? When was it that we were swept into the great flow of the Spirit and drawn forward together? When we loved our neighbors so fully that we fed them and welcomed them, saw them as fully human and met their needs, honored the image of God in them and recognized it because that same image is in us.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2209](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2209)

<sup>6</sup> <http://brianmclaren.net/q-r/>