

“Doing Right Without Sight”

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

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November 22, 2020

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Reign of Christ Sunday, November 22, 2020, dedicated to Pat Liebchen as she recovers from her terrible accident, in thanksgiving for Rev. Eric Williams for his wonderful 18 years of ministry at North Congregational UCC, to our amazing staff, lay leaders and volunteers who give generously of themselves every day, to all the men, women and children of the United States battling COVID-19 right now, to all have died from COVID-19 this year, to their families who will be missing them at their Thanksgiving table this week and to over 10 million Americans who have survived COVID-19 and will be Thanksgiving dinner this week and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In the Chasidic teaching of Judaism, you will find this story. A man died and was brought before the Heavenly Court. When his sins and good deeds were placed on the scales, his sins far outweighed the

good deeds he had done. Suddenly an angel in the Heavenly Court placed a fur coat on the scale of good deeds. When this happened, the scale of good deeds shifted and became the heavier scale and the man was sent to Paradise.

On the way to Paradise he asked the angel who escorted him, *“I cannot understand. What did the fur coat have to do with my judgement?”* The angel replied, *“On a cold wintry night you traveled on a sled and a poor man asked you for a ride. You took him in, and noticing his thin clothes, you placed your fur coat on him to give him warmth. That act of kindness offset all your transgressions.”*

I love this story from sages of Judaism. It reminds me of the power, the weight and the balance given to us in the parable in Matthew 25 today known as “The Final Judgement.” Here Jesus offers his last teaching and final judgement just before he enters into his passion unto death and ultimately his resurrection from the dead. He begins with these words in Matthew 25:31-33:

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.

On the surface, this parable is about sheep and the goats.

The sheep are the righteous ones. They do amazing things for their sisters and brothers. They feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner.

The goats are the unrighteous ones. They don't lift a hoof for their suffering sisters and brothers. And for their lack of action on behalf

of humanity, they are sent into eternal punishment. Meanwhile, the sheep enter eternal life.

In summary - Sheep - good – going to heaven. Goats - bad- going to hell.

But there is much more here... None of the people represented by sheep and goats anticipated this kind of judgment. None had consciously recognized Christ in others, especially not in people who needed help. Neither the sheep or the goats have seen the face of Jesus anywhere. Their behaviors are different, but their perceptions are the same. For those who say, I can't give my time, talent or treasure to help someone who is suffering because I don't see Jesus in them, I pity you. Jesus pities you. Because, the last judgement tells us – **when you see and you act on behalf of the least of these** – your brother in need and your sister in need - hungry, thirsty, homeless, suffering, naked, sick and imprisoned – **you see and you act on behalf of Jesus.**

There is a lot to be said about doing the right thing without seeing God in the action. In other words, doing the right thing is not transactional. It should not be something you do to get something back. It is spiritual. It comes from a seed and source planted within you that is placed in action mode.

If a person is hungry, you feed them. If a person is naked, you clothe them. If a person is thirsty you give them a drink. If a person is alone and homeless, you shelter them. If a person is sick, you care for them. If a person is in prison, you visit them.

There is clarity and transparency here. You are not asking anyone what they have. You are not asking if they have a driver's license

or a green card. You are not asking if they are a certain nationality or ethnicity or racial background. You are not even asking them to produce evidence of their need. And here in Central Ohio - you are not even asking if they cheer for the Ohio State Buckeyes or their greatest opponent and real nemesis - the Indiana Hoosiers.

I don't believe Jesus told this parable to scare us into charity. He knows THAT motivation would leave us trapped in our egoism, even if we did lessen others' suffering. Jesus knew that genuine encounters with the poor and all who are hurting and in need enlarge the heart and the vision of the givers. Solidarity makes us all more human. He invites us to know him in relationship with his beloved poor. When we fall in love with Christ in the poor and with the poor in him, we will inevitably want to serve him in and with them.

The Reign of Christ in Matthew's final parable encapsulates the Gospel irony of firsts and lasts, of losing life and finding it. One way to sum it up is captured in Pope Francis words several years ago: *"when we decide to know, to love and to serve Christ, we will end up smelling like his sheep."*

As Jesus points out, the person who meets his sister or brother where they are and serves them in their place of need is blessed. They see enough to sense the need of another. But they don't see enough to realize it is Jesus they are serving.

This final lesson of life and faith that Jesus leaves us with is so profound that we do a disservice to God in Christ to talk into the ground. It should serve as a guide to all that you do to meet those in need right where they are.

With that in mind, I will close this church year and this sermon with one final story. The story was shared years ago by Father Henri Nouwen. It goes like this...

There was a monk who was travelling on foot from his monastery in the desert to the city to purchase spices and necessary items for cooking. As he travelled along the desert highway, he found himself in a state of bliss. He was feeling close to God as he joyfully made his way through the desert to the city. As he walked, he came upon a beggar who was severely disabled. The man was sitting by a crossroad in the middle of nowhere. He asked the monk to carry him to the city so that he could beg for money at the city gate.

The monk knew that it was the right thing to do. It was the holy thing to do. It was the Christian thing to do. So he lifted the man on his shoulders and began the final part of his journey with the beggar on his back. As he walked, the beggar complained that he was not carrying him carefully enough. He hit the monk on the head and talked incessantly. The bliss and peace that the monk had felt just a little way back, began to slip away. He found himself losing his patience and all the joy that had guided his earlier steps was gone.

When he reached the city gates, he lifted the beggar from his shoulders and placed him where he asked to be placed. The beggar looked at him and said, *"thanks for nothing. That was a miserable ride on your back to get to this place."* Before he exploded, the monk nodded, turned and walked away.

The monk shopped and found what he needed and then prepared to return home to the monastery. He decided to leave by another gate and make a wide turn around the city, so as to miss the beggar upon his return. As he left the city by another gate, who should he see at

the new gate but the same beggar. Once again, the beggar asked for a ride on his shoulders back to the place they had met. Practicing hospitality, kindness and patience, the monk agreed to help him.

The journey back was even harder than the journey into the city. Both men were weighed down – the beggar with alms and food, the monk with food and spices. The beggar, once again, was unrelenting as they walked the many miles back to crossroad. Finally, after cursing and kicking and hitting the monk all the way to the place where they had first met, the monk reached the crossroad as the sun was setting. He put the beggar down. And the beggar said, once again, *“thanks for nothing.”*

This time the monk could not keep silent. This time, he spoke to the beggar. *“You have made my day miserable. You have complained, hit me, kicked me, and then when I have been kind to you and placed on down gently you have said, ‘thanks for nothing.’ I’ve had it. I’m done with you. I hope we never meet again.”*

With that the monk wheeled around and headed down the road back to his monastic home. After ten steps, he turned, looked at the man and asked, *“what is your name, so that I can tell my brothers to avoid you should they come this way?”*

Unexpectedly, the beggar stood and walked toward the monk. When he had come close, he answered the monk’s question. ***“My name is Jesus Christ.”***

The monk fell to his knees to ask for his savior’s forgiveness. But, with those words, the Christ disappeared in the dusk of the desert evening.

We ask: *“Lord, when did we see you?”*

He answers: “*Whatever you did for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did for me.*”

So, may we do the right thing – even if we do not see Jesus.

Amen.