

“What Can be Done about Israel and Palestine?”

Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

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From the Pulpit

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Reign of Christ Sunday, November 26, 2023, dedicated to my youngest daughter Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens Stadie on her 28th birthday, to her daughter Hazel who has especially blessed my life in recent weeks, to my mother and sister who are with us in worship today, and to Evin and Henry Hatch on their baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart 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. His eternal soul was in jeopardy. But 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 his way to Paradise, he asked the escorting angel, *“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 one 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 in Matthew. This is the final judgement offered 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 “goats.”

The sheep are the righteous ones. They do amazing things for those around them. They feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. For their deeds of compassion, the sheep enter eternal life.

The goats are the unrighteous ones. They don't lift a hoof for those suffering around them. And for their lack of action on behalf of humanity, they are sent into eternal punishment.

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

But there is so much more going on here... None of those 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 nor the goats saw 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, too. Because

the last judgement tells us – *when you see and you act on behalf of the least of these* – a human in need – you see, and you act on behalf of Jesus. It is that simple and it is that difficult.

Simple and difficult may best describe the challenges any of us face when encountering someone in need in our lives. When you and I stand face to face with a hungry, naked, thirsty, homeless, sick and imprisoned person, our compassion and empathy may kick in – hopefully will kick in. I pray to God that each of us will see another human in need.

But the divide between simple and difficult grows if and when we DO NOT – or worse yet – WILL NOT see “**the other**” as human. This truly comes to light when terrorism and war enter the human connection between and among people. We have witnessed the horrors and ugliness of this in our nation on September 11, 2001; and in the last few years in the unmitigated and audacious attack on the Ukrainians by Vladimir Putin and the Russians in February 2022, and now the terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7 which left more than 1200 men, women, and children dead in southern Israel and 240 hostages taken. In each case the inhumane assault on innocent men, women and children triggered a defensive, ravishing response from the aggrieved and wounded nation.

In Israel and Palestine, a solution cannot be found when terrorists run Palestine and when Israel is led by a narcissistic socio-pathic criminal as President on the other side – a man who has shown for generations that he only looks out for himself and his own interests.

In each case, those who DO see their neighbors and friends, those who DO care for the other, get crushed as they reach out to care and make a difference in the midst of terror and war lust. Inside the conflict, they must rise and be heard and be the guides for setting up a better future for all the people – Arabs and Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims and all the international people who work and live in Israel and Palestine.

Roger Cohen, writing from Jerusalem in the *New York Times* on November 22, 2023, in a piece entitled, “Between Israelis and Palestinians, a Lethal Psychological Chasm Grows” observes that “In a conflict marked by complete incomprehension on both sides, the ability to see each other as human has been lost.” He quotes Mohammad Darawshe, the director of strategy at the Givat Haviva Center for Shared Society, which promotes Jewish-Arab dialogue and is about an hour’s drive north of Jerusalem. Darawshe says, “Each side begs for the status of five-star victim. If you are stuck in victimhood, you see everyone else as victimizing and dehumanizing.”

The consequence, continues Cohen, is a psychological chasm so deep that Palestinians are invisible as individuals to Israeli Jews, and the Israeli Jews are invisible as individuals to Palestinians. The result of this divergence is death and utter destruction created by one against the other.

“There are exceptions, of course: Some Israelis and Palestinians have dedicated themselves to bridging that divide. But generally, the narratives of the two sides diverge, burying any perception of shared humanity.”

I have seen this, too. If your eyes fire up with hatred and disdain when you look at another human, you will not seek to make peace or find peace or be peace in your relationship with that person – or others who are close to that person. Multiplied out to a group of people over more than 76 years of seeing the other as evil or bad or the cause of all your pain and problems, there is no easy way out of this loop. It will play out until everybody is dead and gone – and then continue in the next generation of unreconciled souls.

Here at home – since the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas on the kibbutzes in southern Israel, I have been listening to many of my Jewish sisters and brothers and a some of my Muslim sisters and brothers – as they share the pain they are experiencing. Their pain is intense and real. And it is pain that crosses over their own kind – if you will – to see and feel the pain of “the other.”

In addition, the rise of Antisemitic acts has risen against Jews in America and worldwide. Here in the past 50 days, acts of antisemitism have risen more than 400%. A leader in a synagogue in Detroit was murdered. In the name of support for the Palestinians, protests in this region have turned ugly. Here in Columbus, OSU students were beaten as they left a bar after being asked by the assailants if they were Jews. That very same night, The Hillel House on campus was vandalized by people screaming insults, tearing down Israeli flags and destroying property.

In the high school from which my children graduated, Worthington Kilbourne High School, there was a walkout in “support of Palestine” which vilified Jews, and students were approaching Jews in the hallways making the Nazi salute of “Zeig Heil” as they passed them there. As one Jewish teen told her father, “I was fearful that all friends and classmates would get up and walk out of class leaving only me in the room.” Wow! I can tell you this – you and I cannot stop the war in Israel/Gaza all by ourselves. But we can SEE our neighbors right near us and rise up and protect them and others – who we do not know.

It was silence that empowered the Nazis under Hitler to keep eliminating and destroying Jews in Europe and North Africa. The Nazis counted on the lack of response to destroy the Jews and wipe them from the face of the earth – which is the ultimate definition and practice of genocide.

In his poem, “A Servant to Servants,” Robert Frost wrote, “The best way out is always through.” Perhaps that was what Jesus was saying too in his final words to humanity. We cannot get out of the loop we live in of disdain, distrust, hatred and more if we simply practice a life philosophy of fight or flight. We have to go back through and find our way out of the loops in our lives. We can be freed from our psychological and spiritual loop by Seeing and Doing in relation to others. When we see “the other” and when we do the right thing for them, we break the cycle which has held us captive for too long.

The key is seeing THE human beside you as A human. Our dehumanizing them in any way will lead us on to the path of cruelty and away from kindness. If you do not see your neighbor as human, unleashing hate instead of love causes the utter disintegration of all Jesus' equations of care and concern. Everything breaks down when you see your neighbor as less than human. Conversely, everything moves toward healing and hope when you see your neighbor as human – and care for them.

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 anything back. It is spiritual. It is ethical. 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.

I don't believe Jesus told this parable to scare people into charity. I think Jesus was genuinely worried about us and the poor – who he had given his life to care for. He knew that the motivation to scare people leaves us trapped in our egotism, even if we did lessen others' suffering. Jesus knew that genuine encounters with the poor and all who are in need – enlarge the heart and the vision of the giver. 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 in those who are suffering, we identify with the poverty and pain in him. When we do this, we will 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 another human being 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 in Matthew's Gospel is so profound that we do a disservice to God and Jesus to talk into the ground.

Like the man in the Chasidic tale headed to Paradise, we get on the right path to eternal salvation with one act of kindness done simply because we saw and we did for another in need. Let's start today. Amen.