

**Members of the Family
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 25:31-46**

I find myself looking forward to Thanksgiving this year a little more than usual. It's always been one of my favorite holidays—free from much of the commercialism and consumerism of Christmas, for example. But right now, after a particularly challenging Fall of surgery, treatments, unsettling side effects and chronic fatigue, I feel a deep need to give thanks. To thank *you*, my Fairmount family, for the loving, thoughtful, and continuous support you've shown me in this hard time. Your cards and offers of help, flowers and food and little notes stuck to my back door saying you were praying for my health and comfort, have meant a world of healing to me. I don't recommend chemo without a congregation behind you! And you've been the best I could imagine.

Is it true that tough times make us more grateful? I've read plenty of speculation in the news media that thanksgiving will be demanding in a year marked by economic crisis and two wars and much uncertainty about the future. Our portfolios may be diminished; some of us have faced—or will soon face—unemployment or job-related stress, we may be struggling with illness or find ourselves in the middle of transition..... Yet in spite or perhaps even because of these difficulties, we feel more compelled than ever to offer gratitude, to say thank you, to thank God. . . .for the things that really matter: for life, for hope, for the people who love us through the vulnerability we all experience as members of the human family.

At first reading, our gospel text may not seem to fit a thanksgiving theme, because it does not so much sound a tone of gratitude as judgment. Jesus describes a time in the future when God's Kingdom will be fully realized and the divine Ruler will separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Before we read the text, let's recall that it is part of a larger section of Jesus' teachings we've explored the past two Sundays about the coming rule of God. Invest in it, like the faithful servants who followed the generous example of their master. Be prepared for it, like the

bridesmaids who had their lamps trimmed and ready for the arrival of the bridegroom. And today, we learn the surprising location of Christ's presence with us here and now, and the basis for hope in a day when earth will be at peace, when all people will share abundant goodness, when "death itself will be no more; when mourning and crying and pain will be no more." Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the 25th chapter, at the 31st verse:

[MATTHEW 25:31-46]

This is an almost perfect text for a sermon calling the congregation to engage in ministries of compassion to the hungry, homeless, troubled, or refugee. In a dramatic, entirely unambiguous way, Jesus identifies treatment of "the least of these" as the factor which determines either eternal reward or punishment. So we could just cut to the chase: show up for the pancake breakfast and get those food baskets filled; volunteer when we host homeless families next week with the Interfaith Hospitality Network; join the Deacons and visit the sick and homebound among us. I'm pretty sure a case could be made to connect your stewardship commitments with Fairmount's ministries to those in need, without even implying there might be goats among us. On the one hand, I honestly don't think there's anything wrong with this reading, because we can't be reminded too often of the Church's calling to be instruments of God's grace and peace in a hurting and broken world. For a community of faith founded by a Teacher who was regularly accused of being friend to tax collectors, harlots, and other needy sorts, how could we do or be any different?

But I also think that understanding falls a little short of revealing the powerful and redemptive truth of God's judgment, which ultimately is not about what we must do, but what God has done for us. The spotlight in this text is trained not on the sheep, the goats, nor the needy, but on the King who sits on the throne. And this is none other than the Son of Man, who suffered, was crucified, and died. The Judge has himself been the victim of human judgment. But in this scene, he is exalted as the ruling Lord. The powers of death have been conquered. The Kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven. Look, we don't have to be afraid of the future because we know how it ends. The Good Guy wins. And rules over all. The day is coming when no one will be hungry or shamed or ostracized or sick or forgotten. The day is coming when all people will know plenty and peace. Thank God!

Can you imagine how this message of hope might have played to its first audience??! Governed under the oppressive rule of Rome, taxed beyond any hope of financial independence, these promises must have seemed pretty sketchy. And we cannot ignore the way they have been manipulated by powers both secular and religious through the ages to maintain control over oppressed minorities. Keep them in chains on earth with promises of heaven in the sweet hereafter.

This distorted interpretation is impossible when we return to the identification of the King with the ones in need, with “the least of these.” In this interim time, before the Kingdom is fully established, the King will be found among the outcast and lowly. But what I find curious about the text is that neither the sheep nor the goats recognized him there! *Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison...?*” is the question asked by *both* the ones who served, and the ones who didn’t. It wasn’t spiritual insight that served as the motivation to care for those in need; the sheep weren’t inspired to extend care by the presence of Christ among the poor. Instead, it was the recognition of their common humanity; that even “the least of these” are members of the family and as such, deserving of love, attention, and continuous support. Jesus doesn’t so much ask that we see Him in the faces of the hurting, as he asks that we see ourselves. That we recognize in them, familiar faces very much like our own: beautiful, flawed, made in God’s image, and in need of God’s mercy and grace.

The terrible cost exacted by a lack of recognition can be seen in the barriers erected between human beings that increase the difficulty of getting to know one another. Physical walls such as those dividing Jews and Arabs in the West Bank or the ones between our nation and Mexico; the invisible but effective lines drawn between urban and suburban neighborhoods; the psychological barriers of fear and ignorance that maintain strong fences protecting our comfort zones. Uwem Akpan is a Nigerian priest and writer whose chronicles of the lives of African children were published this year in a collection called “Say You’re One of Them.” The phrase comes from one of the short stories about a Rwandan family with both Hutu father and a Tutsi mother—and comprises the heartbreaking advice they offer their children under threat of ethnic

cleansing and genocide. *When they ask you, the mother warns her young daughter, say you're one of them.*

The distance we put between “us” and “them” has been judged; the notion that we can build a good life for “just us” without regard for “justice” weighed in the balance and found wanting.

We are called to trust our future to the One who insists we are family, and that our lives are inextricably and redemptively linked. Imagine how differently we might respond to need if we saw the single mother working two jobs, the chronically mentally ill homeless man, the fifteen-year-old serving time for armed robbery, the person with AIDS, as our sisters and brothers, as ourselves. Fact is, we are. And the Kingdom of justice and peace comes ever closer when we act like it. No, you and I may never experience physical hunger or worry about putting food on our family table. But everyone of us know the ache of an unrealized dream or a yearning we can't satisfy. We may never serve time in jail, but may be imprisoned as surely by chains of addiction or prejudice or materialism. We're all part of the "least of these" as truly as we are part of the family. To discover that truth is as complicated as intentional learning about others' realities. About listening to the particular stories and experiences of those we might not regularly encounter, people we might otherwise categorize broadly or clump into statistics and bar graphs. To regard others as members of the family may well require that we get out of our comfort zone and question our assumptions. But it's also as simple as taking time really to look at and listen to the persons we meet every day. A pastor colleague tells of stopping at a restaurant for brunch after worship one Sunday. The place was busy and crowded and the server seemed tired. Without identifying his profession, he expressed sympathy for having to be on her feet and dealing with so many customers. “What’s the hardest day of the work week?” he inquired. Her reply? “Sunday. I dread all the people who come here after church. They make so many demands and some are so impatient. And they never tip hardly anything.” [Roger Lovette, from “Where’s Jesus?” in Pulpit Resource, p. 33] Ouch. Have we missed a connection here; an opportunity to care for a member of the family?

Today is the final Sunday in the church year, a day designated as “Christ the King.” Next week the season of Advent ushers in a new year. Poised on the threshold of past and future, we celebrate

Christ's rule in our lives today, even as we renew our faith in the Kingdom yet to come. Hope and grace abound. (Heck, there may yet come a day when "lowly Michigan" is once again hailed as a victor) But you know it's hard to wait in an interim time. There's plenty of evidence to make us doubt that the best is yet to be. That's why today is a good one to show up at the pancake breakfast and fill the food baskets for those in need. Sign up to help extend hospitality for homeless families. Write a note of encouragement to someone going through a hard time. And make your financial commitment to the ministry of Christ's church with gratitude and joy. O friends, hear again the good news, and rely on the promise: *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. Come and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.* Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God! AMEN.

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