



## “What It Means to Be Righteous”

*Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg*

*November 26, 2017*

*Matthew 25:31-46*

I sure hope y'all like surprises because over the past several weeks the Gospel readings have been just that – very surprising. I'm beginning to feel like we might need to change our customary response of “Thanks be to God” to “Yikes!” Most of the parables we have heard Jesus tell recently have been complicated and convoluted. A couple of weeks ago we examined the parable of the poor man who failed to wear the proper wedding attire, only to be removed from the party even though he had no opportunity to change his clothes. The surprise this guest received was being cast out into the darkness. Yet, it is still my belief that the prince in this parable, the son who was missing from his own wedding, was Jesus and that he was outside in the darkness with those being cast away, cast out, and put out. And last week we saw that if we put our talents into the institutions and principalities of power, we often take advantage of and hurt others. The Parable of the Talents is about an honorable servant who doesn't use his master's wealth to steal even more from the poor, but instead buries, gives it back to God, returns it in full. That parable showed us that if we stand firm in our beliefs, often we are cast out of positions and professions. But as we take care of the least of these and travel the margins, that is where Jesus is waiting, that is where Jesus helps, holds, and heals.

And so we get another tricky parable today. A parable that surprises us and makes us say, “Yikes!” We, of course, expect the goats to be surprised: “Lord, when,” they ask, “did we see you and fail to care for you?” But the interesting part of this text is that the sheep are no less surprised: “Lord, when did we see you and care for you? When did we see you and do all of these things you say?” The surprising part of this text today is that the goats did not see themselves as goats, but neither did the sheep recognize themselves as sheep. Both groups had the same response, “We don't remember taking care of you, Jesus.” What we find is that we must live our lives constantly helping people. If we do, it becomes who we are and our actions become second nature. It is not something we do for show or for accolades or for prestige. We do it because we are living like Christ and living for Christ. The sheep, those who are righteous responded out of humbleness after receiving a positive word from Jesus. The goats responded with indignation and defense when called out for not acting as the caretakers of the sick, lost, and hopeless. Yet both didn't see Jesus. Both failed to see the face of Christ in those who were needy, hurting, and marginalized. Yikes!

But what exactly are the people in the parable surprised by? That they acted either in a righteous way by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned or, on the other hand, in an unrighteous way by neglecting to notice those needing care and compassion? Neither group denies their behavior. I believe they are surprised by their failure to recognize the Son of Man. Or, more to the point, they are surprised by where the Son of Man hangs out.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday or Christ the King Sunday. We proclaim the royalty and the power of the one who resides in majesty and in glory. We see at the beginning of this parable today that the Son of Man comes in glory, that all the angels are with him, and that he sits on a glorious throne. And that's what the goats and the sheep both expect. We expect Jesus to be the King of Glory and the Prince of Peace. When we think of Jesus, we typically think in terms of power and might and glory. And, indeed, the parable begins by describing the coming of the Son of Man in glory to sit on his throne attended by angels, seemingly only reinforcing our preconceptions. But as we continue to dig deeper into the power and purposes of Jesus, we see that he isn't royalty. We see who Jesus really sides with and whom he comforts. And that's the surprise. The surprise in this text resides in the fact that no one expects to see Jesus in the face of the disadvantaged, the poor, the imprisoned, and all those who are in need.

But let's not get lost on the preamble to this parable. Let's not get lost on this Christ the King Sunday and linger too long on Jesus's grand introduction. Let's lean into the rest of the parable which depicts this same royal figure as identifying with "the least of these," seemingly undermining our tendency to look for God in places of power. This parable not only calls into question where we typically look for God, but actually reorients us to discover and experience God's presence in our own lives and the lives of those on the margins more fully than ever before.

And this reveals to us a God of surprises. The God we know in Jesus seems to delight in surprising us, surprising us on this last day of the Christian Year, the Sunday before Advent, this Christ the King Sunday when Christ's glory and majesty is highlighted, this Sunday before Jesus is made lowly and is found wrapped in rags lying in a feed trough. This is definitely a surprising Sunday.

Karoline Lewis, author and professor says it beautifully. She says, "After all, God didn't come to reign over humanity at Athens or Rome or any of the other major cities where one would expect God to arrive, but rather – surprise! – God came to identify with us by being born in lowly Bethlehem in the form of a vulnerable infant. And God didn't come to conquer the world with military or political might, but instead – surprise! – in the scandal, shame, and pain of the cross. So, also, God continues to come where we least expect God to be: in the plight of the homeless, on the side of the poor, in the face of the needy, and in the company of the imprisoned."

I think this parable calls us to suspend our expectations that the kingdom of God, that the reign of Christ is an ideal future in a distant existence. This parable calls us to live into the surprising reality of a God we experience in Christ, a divine one that is less of a heartless judge but ultimately with those in need here and now, in the concrete and real presence of our neighbors, just as our neighbors are invited to meet and be blessed by God as they tend to our needs as well. The God we know in Jesus is revealed, as Lewis poetically says, "Not in power but in vulnerability, not in might but brokenness, and not in judgment but in mercy."

Then what are we to do with the harsh judgment we find in this parable? Might we understand this parable through the lens of the mercy of Christ rather than the judgment of this world? How might we see what it means to be righteous rather than the harshness of the Son of Man who comes in glory and dismisses the unrighteous to eternal fire? We must first realize that Jesus

shares this parable on the way to the cross. Although we are heading into Advent and the birth of Jesus, this parable represents Jesus's very last words before the beginning of his passion. The next verse in chapter 26 of Matthew begins with: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'"

And this is where the surprisingly good news comes: that God is with us, here and now. That the face of Christ is revealed in the fellowship of the broken people we call church. That the face of Christ can be seen in the lives of all of those whom we offer mercy and care. That the face of Christ is not reflected proudly on a glimmering throne but revealed in the ordinary elements of bread and wine and available to us in the seemingly small gestures of love and hope that we offer and are offered each and every day. This parable is surprisingly good news if we learn how to see Christ in our world.

This time of year, I love to read the children's short story by Leo Tolstoy, *Papa Panov's Special Christmas*. Leo Tolstoy is a literary giant, known for his lengthy novels such as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Yet, this story reveals his expert use of symbolism and poetic language even in his shorter texts. The tiny tale goes like this:

Papa Panov was an elderly cobbler who lived by himself in a small Russian village. His wife had recently died and his children were all grown up. Alone on Christmas Eve in his shop, Papa Panov decided to open the old family Bible and read the Christmas story about the birth of Jesus. That night, he had a dream in which Jesus came to him and said that he would visit Papa Panov in person tomorrow, Christmas Day. But Jesus told Papa Panov that he would have to pay special attention since the disguised Jesus would not reveal his true identity.

Papa Panov woke up the next morning, excited about Christmas Day and the meeting of his potential visitor. He prepared lovely gifts and delicious food for his soon-to-be guest. He then noticed that a street sweeper was working early on that cold winter morning. Touched by his hard work and dejected appearance, Papa Panov invited him inside for a cup of hot coffee. Later in the day, a single mother with a worn face, too old for her young age, walked down the street clutching her baby. Again, Papa Panov invited them in to warm up by the fire and eat. Papa Panov even gave the baby a beautiful brand-new pair of shoes that he had made.

As the day went by, Papa Panov kept his eyes peeled for his holy visitor. But he only saw his neighbors and other beggars on the street. He decided to feed the beggars and all who were hungry. Soon it was dark and Papa Panov retired indoors with a sigh, believing his dream was only a pipe dream. But then the voice of Jesus spoke and it was revealed that Jesus came to Papa Panov in each and every person he helped that day, from the street sweeper to the local beggar. At the end of Tolstoy's story, the voice of Jesus came to Papa Panov, saying, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was cold and you warmed me. I came to you today in every one of those you helped and welcomed."

Might I suggest that what's at stake in this parable of the goats and the sheep is not the decision of a royal arbiter, condemning us to eternal judgment, but rather the delight of meeting and recognizing the face of Christ right here and right now. This parable reminds us that Jesus, as it

turns out, comes not as the sovereign king we might expect, but instead surprises us by appearing in those among and around us, in our neighbors, in our friends, in the rich, in the poor, in those like us and those very different than us. We simply have to notice.

So, we are surprised this day. We are surprised by the one who cares about the needs of all; by the one who comes always in justice and mercy; by the one who received judgment on the cross for us; by the one who meets us in the needs of our neighbors; and by the one who works in us and through us in surprising and unexpected ways. And as we exit Thanksgiving and Reign of Christ Sunday, we do so trusting that Jesus, the one who came, the one who comes, and the one who is coming again, is undeniably and steadfastly for us and for all the world. If believing in a crucified Christ rather than a kingly Christ is what it means to be righteous, then suddenly my reading of this parable doesn't end anymore with "yikes" but it can now end with "Thanks be to God."

Amen.