

I Was in Prison

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Matthew 25:31-46 — "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. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

If today's second reading troubled you at all; if it raised some questions for you, and you're a bit anxious about what the answers might be; if it seemed to challenge some of your ideas or threaten some of your beliefs, and left you feeling a little confused or uneasy, welcome to following Jesus. Sometimes, his words are meant to soothe and console us; other times, they are meant to unsettle us. But rest assured that being unsettled is a part of the process that God has planned for us, a necessary step as we become, slowly but surely, the kind of people that God has called us to be.

The images of punishment in today's story will be unsettling to many, no doubt. But perhaps I can ease some of your concern here. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus tells all sorts of stories about the Kingdom of God and about the end of the world, and in these stories, he uses all sorts of images and metaphors, and the point of it all isn't to tell us *precisely* what will happen after we die. Jesus isn't trying to give us a literal description of that; rather, he's using these images to give us a better understanding of what God ultimately cares about. In today's story, we see what matters most to God in eternity, and based on that, we discern what God most wants from us in our earthly lives.

And according to this story, what God most wants, what seemingly matters most to God, will surprise many Christians. Many would expect to read something more like this: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom, prepared for you from the foundation of the world...for you have confessed Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and you have believed the two, or three, or four, or however many things that you *must* believe in order to be saved.” Or something like this: “Come, inherit the kingdom, for you attended church faithfully all those years, volunteering here and donating there.” Or maybe this: “Come, inherit the kingdom, for you were a member of the right political party and supported the right political platforms.” Or “Come, inherit the kingdom, for you didn’t do anything *terribly* wrong, and you were generally a nice person, so we’re all good.” Wouldn’t that be convenient? But what the story actually says is this: “Come, inherit the kingdom, for 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.” According to this story, what matters most to God in the end isn’t that we believed the right things, or that we voted for the right people, or that we were decent, church-going folk; what matters most to God in the end is that we cared for those in need. And indeed, when we care for those in need, we are caring for Christ.

What I find most remarkable about this story is that the faithful and the unfaithful alike are surprised in the end. Both those who cared and those who didn’t care are unaware of the fact that they were encountering Christ in the hungry, the homeless, the immigrant, the inmate. It seems that everyone underestimates just how much these people matter to God, just how much God is present in and through them.

Since I came to this church, almost a year and a half ago now, I have exchanged several letters with Deb’s son Paul, who is currently incarcerated in Colorado. Some of you here, I know, have also exchanged letters with him. Each time I’ve written a letter to Paul, and each time I’ve received a letter from him, my soul has been nourished, and my heart has swelled. Since that’s the case, you might think that, whenever I get a letter from him, I make a priority of responding to it. But that’s not necessarily true. Sometimes, his letter sits on my desk for weeks, while sermon drafts and Session notes and various other papers slowly pile on top. On numerous occasions, I’ve put a note on my calendar, reminding me to sit down and write Paul a letter. But then a meeting goes long, or the bulletin takes more time than expected to complete, or—less honorably—an opportunity to hang out with friends comes up, and Paul’s letter to me remains at the bottom of the pile.

Several weeks ago, Deb texted me and asked if I had received Paul’s most recent letter. He was eager to know that I had received it, because he wanted me to share its contents with all of us, his church. Deb’s text made me blush. I vaguely remembered receiving a letter from Paul in the recent past, but I honestly couldn’t remember how long ago it was, and I couldn’t remember what I had done with it. I told Deb that I thought I’d received it and that I would search my office for it the following day. I did, and I couldn’t find it. Perhaps I left it in one of my bags, I thought,

or used it as a bookmark in one of the books I was reading (I do that occasionally). I searched thoroughly, desperately, but found nothing. Then this morning's passage from Matthew 25 crept into my mind and stung me. Here I was, running around, doing all of this good work as a pastor, while neglecting one of the things that God cares most about. Here I was, living as if Jesus had said to me, "I was looking for a good sermon, and you gave it to me," when actually, Jesus was saying, "I wrote you a letter from prison, and you haven't responded to me."

I confessed to Deb that I had misplaced the letter, but that I would keep looking for it. Then, one morning, a little less than two weeks ago, I sat down at my office desk, and there it was: Paul's letter, turned upside down, right where my left wrist usually wrests when I'm typing on the computer. I got up, ran to Robert with the letter, and asked, "Did you put this on my desk?" "No," he said. I could not believe that it had been right there all along, but I suppose that my bizarre misplacement of the letter mirrored the misplacement of my priorities.

In closing this morning, I'd like to read you a few excerpts from Paul's letter. After the service, it'll be downstairs in the fellowship hall for anyone to read. Keep in mind that the apostle Paul wrote many letters to churches while he was imprisoned (the book of Philippians in our Bibles is one example), and these letters would have been read aloud in front of the congregation, like we're doing here. Just as Christians throughout the generations have encountered Christ in the apostle Paul's letters, friends, let us seek to encounter Christ in the words of our own Paul:

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The word of the Lord.