

### **Matthew 22:34-40**

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup>and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup>He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

### **Behavior Before Belief Reverend Joylynn Graham 08-06-17**

The other day I was in Walmart checking out my groceries when the cashier says to me: “so, are you living the dream yet?” He was probably looking for some sort of witty, yet sarcastic answer, but I didn’t have one, so I responded by saying to him: “well, I am living *a* dream.”

I thought that would be the end of it, but he just stood there looking puzzled, so I went on to say that we are all dreamers living a dream, and that I was living mine same as everyone else.

Now remember I’m checking out at Walmart; there are people in line behind me, and already, I can sense the growing anxiety radiating from that direction – but this cashier was not going to let me off the hook that easily, because the next thing he wants to know is what my dream is.

I don’t know, maybe he was still looking for some sort of clever answer, but I was all out of clever answers that day, so I tell him that explaining my dream is going to require a lot more time than we have, and then I look pointedly at the line behind me.

He kind of snapped out of it and started scanning my groceries again, but then he grew reflective, and said that while he knew that *some* people might see *him* as “living the dream,” he was having trouble seeing it because all he did was work, for very little money, and he just couldn’t seem to get on top of things.

So now, he had my full attention.

Now the pastor in me was wishing that we did have time for more discussion, because this kid had just made it clear that while he understood what he had would seem like a lot to those with less, he also understood that his struggle was real – and he didn’t know what to do with the conflict.

So today’s reading is rather unsettling, isn’t it? Today, Jesus is describing the end of the world for his people. He tells them that all of the nations will gather together before a huge throne where he, Christ-the-king, will separate them into two groups – those destined for eternal life and those destined for eternal punishment. And the criteria that determines who will end up where, is to be based on how they have fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, cared for the sick, and treated those in prison.

The imagery is powerful, and even though it reflects a time when kings sat on thrones and judged those gathered before them, the issues presented are the same old issues that we're dealing with today. The questions are still our questions. How well have we – as a nation, as a church, even as individuals – fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, cared for the sick, and treated those in prison?

I still remember very well when Occupy Wall Street demonstrations were sweeping the country. The official slogan was “we are the 99%” which alluded to the fact that 1% of the U.S. population controls 40% of the wealth. The protest gave voice to the growing recognition that we are not doing such a good job at allocating our resources, and that too many are hungry and homeless in a land of plenty.

And all of that was certainly true enough, but the vision of the movement was pretty limited because it failed to see that most of the Americans who saw themselves as the 99%, were actually still in the 1% when compared to the rest of the world.

And what impressed me about my young Walmart friend, was that even in his misery, he instinctively seemed to grasp that. And it bothered him.

I don't know about you, but this final judgment scene brings up a lot of questions for me. I may be part of the 99% in the United States statistically, but how much am I really suffering? My needs are met. I have food, drink, clothing, and shelter. It's a joke to even compare myself, because there are an incredible number of people in this world who are truly starving to death. There are immigrants and refugees with no place to go, there are sick who are being denied care, and there are prisoners who are being abused and exploited. It's overwhelming – paralyzing even.

What can I do? What can we do?

One leg of my journey this summer was to visit the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. For many years I have wanted to go there and see the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre. I wanted to go and see the people who were shoved aside to make room for us – a fact that has caused me great shame ever since I learned of it. And even though I had a really good idea of what to expect, the reality of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks.

Right here, in the middle of this glorious and beautiful land, there is an entire nation of suffering people. Actually there are several. And these are not random nations, they are *the* nation – *the* original occupants. The ones who keep getting pushed farther and farther out so that we can move further and further in. Hidden in plain sight – an entire people. And when you cross the boundary, it's like stepping into a third world country where immediately everyone starts surrounding you and trying to sell you things so they can get enough money to go to the doctor or eat or provide for their kids. Only it wasn't a third world country; this was a Conoco station in South Dakota.

For me, the shame was overwhelming, and what really hurt was knowing I couldn't do a darn thing about it. I could show up and pay my respects at the site of the massacre – which felt pretty lame; and I could offer a few bucks to a mother and child – which felt even lamer, but I couldn't do anything to *change the situation*. It felt like I was trapped in my bubble of privilege, and all I could do was look out at the suffering world and repeat over and over, “What can I do? What can we do?”

I hate that feeling. Normally I try to avoid it because if you let it suck you in too far then you're hard pressed to get back out and you still haven't actually done anything.

But we still have to keep asking the questions: “What can I do? What can we do?” Because as Mother Teresa said, “We cannot all do great things, but we can all do small things with great love.”

Whoa ---

So we might not be able to solve the hunger problem, but we can we feed hungry people – at least for a little while. And we can clothe people, if they want, but I’m starting to see where most people would prefer not to receive all our cast offs. We can welcome the stranger – we might not be able to take on the immigration laws, but we can welcome the stranger among us. We can take care of the sick and we can visit the prisoners, yes, YES! We can do those things!

Will it transform us from goats into sheep? Well – I’ll leave that up to Jesus.

In the story of the final judgment, the king separates the nations into two groups, sheep and goats. But there’s actually a total of three groups: the sheep, the goats, and the “least of these.” And of course we all wonder which category we fall into, but I think most of the time we’re moving between the three.

Sometimes we are absolutely brilliant at seeing needs and addressing them. But other times we block those needs out. Sometimes we are surrounded by people who are dealing with depression or feelings of inadequacy or with financial crises. Other times it’s our turn to deal with something hard. Of course we’d rather play the hero – the one meeting everyone’s needs, but sometimes life throws us a curveball, and then it’s our turn to be the vulnerable one. We can get pretty good at hiding our own needs – even from ourselves – but that doesn’t help anyone evolve from a goat to a sheep.

And you know, the more I think about it, the more I realize that there aren’t even three groups of people anyway. There’s just one group of people: people. People who sometimes care for the “least of these,” people who sometimes don’t care for the “least of these,” and people who sometimes *are* “the least of these.”

Well, as complicated as all that might seem, Jesus’ message in today’s story is actually quite simple. And I say that because if you notice, there is no instruction on belief or doctrine. There is no mention of personal, emotional conversion experience. There is no question about understanding the socio-political setting of the scriptures in order to assure an accurate historical critical interpretation. There is no reference to deviant behavior, no litany of codes or creeds, and there is no prohibition on swearing.

The message is simple and straightforward. Treat you neighbor right.

The lawyer asked Jesus, “What’s the most important commandment?” and Jesus answered him straight up without beating around the bush, “Love God with your whole being, and Love your neighbor as yourself.” The question and answer is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in one form or another, and according to Luke, Jesus then goes on to tell a story that suggests that “our neighbor” is anyone who might need our help.

The gospels record several instances when someone asked Jesus, in one form or another, “How do I enter the Kingdom of God?” And he almost always suggested some form of action. The “rich man” who was sure he was following the law, was told he needed to give up his wealth and donate it to the

poor. The priests were told to give up their hypocrisy. But Jesus never once suggested that the questioner had to acquire some “right” or correct belief.

You see, the reality is that it is much easier to debate theology, Christology, and creeds than it is to follow the teachings of Jesus and to actually do what he asks us to do.

And he doesn't just expect that we figure out how to do these things; he leads us and he shows us by example. The Jesus we meet in the gospels is a man of action: he heals; he forgives; he demonstrates compassion; he takes a stand against injustices; he shares; he weeps; he loves unconditionally. He then tells his disciples and interested followers to go and do likewise.

Jesus knew that the fullest expression of what we believe is what we do, and the fullest expression of what we believe is found in how we live out our faith, not in what we say.

When we put behavior ahead of belief; when we become willing to just go where he leads, we are bound to treat our fellow human beings with kindness and respect. - And whether you're feeling sheepish, goatish, or the least-of-these-ish, the greatest expression of our belief is the way we behave toward one another, and toward other people.

Amen.