

Matthew 25:31-46
Welcome a Stranger, Welcome Christ 4
The Divine Test of Hospitality
8.13.23

Jesus ends his teaching ministry
With the parable we read this morning.

In the Gospel of Matthew
Jesus begins his ministry
With the Sermon on the Mount
And ends his ministry with this parable.

Both are fitting bookends to Jesus' life and ministry

They are both lessons in Christian discipleship.

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Jesus' parable takes us to the end of time
Theologians call the eschaton.

For comparison's sake
Some religions see history as circular
What goes around, comes around
We're caught up in the wheel of time.

The Judeo/Christian tradition views history as linear
With a beginning and an end.

It was God who initiated the beginning
And it will be God who initiates the end.

Our parable points to the Day of Judgement
When Jesus, the Son of Man returns

And takes his rightful place on the throne of glory.

He will gather all of humanity before him.

Believers and nonbelievers, Catholics, and Jews

Mormons and Baptists and Brethren

And Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims

And atheists and agnostics, and the “nones”

Everyone who ever lived on earth will stand before Him.

Jesus is the judge and the court is in session.

No one escapes judgment.

The Son of Man will divide the people into two groups.

Like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats.

There is no graduated classification system here.

You're either in or you're out.

And then there will be, as Fred Craddock declares

The ultimate, unambiguous and complete moment of truth.

According to this parable

People are judged on one criterion.

What you or I did, or didn't do

To the least of these members of God's family.

The sheep, of course, are those saved by Jesus
And who will enter paradise

The goats are the unsaved ones
Who will enter into eternal punishment.

Now mind you, Jesus is teaching this parable.

If you are a red-letter Christian, meaning
You feel that the words of Jesus
Are vital instructions for the way we should live.

Then take note, this parable is in red letters

This is not the soft, warm, fuzzy, Jesus
We've come to expect
It is Jesus, the king, on Judgement Day

Take heed, brothers and sisters.

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This lesson in the parable
The last of his teachings, is simply this.

It is the title of this sermon series

When you welcome a stranger, you welcome Christ.

It is based on Jesus' proclamation

**Just as you've done to the least of these, my brethren,
you've done it unto me.**

Benedict XVI wrote

Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison.

Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God (Deus Caritas Est, 15).

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Our sermon series, *Welcome a Stranger, Welcome Christ*
Deals with the sacred and lost art of hospitality.

Hospitality is no longer an important tradition
In today's society.

But I believe hospitality
Lay at the core of the church's mission.

Because, when the church serves others
Most especially the "least of these"
We are in truth serving Christ.

We discover by serving others
We are building community
AND a deeper relationship with God.

It seems counter-intuitive.

If any of us, were asked the question
"How does one get close to God"

We'd likely respond

Through prayer, confession, and repentance

We probably wouldn't say

We can build a deeper relationship with Jesus
By serving the "least of these".

But that is what this parable is teaching us.

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In today's parable, Jesus comes incognito.

The sheep do not recognize Jesus in serving others.

They do not know the ones in whom Christ will come.

In fact, if you remember two other Scripture Lessons

We used in this sermon series
You will recognize there's a pattern.

In the Genesis passage

We saw Abraham and Sarah
Elaborately hosting three strangers

The three strangers end up being agents of God

With the message that Sarah will conceive a child

They didn't recognize Divine presence

In showing hospitality to strangers, until later.

Or the two disciples walking the road to Emmaus.

They hosted a stranger who walked along with them

And showed him hospitality without recognizing
Divine presence

It was only later in the breaking of bread
They discovered the stranger was Jesus.

The author of Hebrews sums it up nicely.

Hebrews 13:2 NIV Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

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Let me say this, though.

It is much safer and easier to think
You've got Jesus trapped
Within the four walls of the church

It is much easier to acknowledge Divine presence
In the bread and cup or in the preaching of his word
Or in the time of prayer.

Than it is to seek Christ's presence in the stranger
The foreigner, the homeless, the imprisoned.

But the truth of it is that by serving Jesus in the least of these

We reach across boundaries
Bonding with people who are outcast and rejected.

But that is where we find Jesus
In the building of an unlikely community.

A community built across social, racial, and cultural chasms.

This is kingdom building!

The mercy of the Good Samaritan bonded two unlikely souls
A Jew and a Samaritan.

Paul says that in Christ

Galatians 3:28 CEV Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman.

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In this final teaching parable, Jesus is incognito.

For the final test of humanity is a test of hospitality.

Whether you and I did or didn't do for the least of these

In other words, biblical hospitality is not confined
To homes and churches
But extends out to the hi-ways and by-ways.

Hospitality isn't simply inviting someone over for dinner.

Jesus' parable teaches us
That hospitality extends beyond that
To people shunned and ostracized by the world.

From an article written by Alastair Roberts

By coming to us incognito in the form of the destitute, the needy, and the stranger, Christ tests our posture towards these people.

*Only by a universal extension of hospitality can we enjoy
Jesus' particular presence.*

If we witnessed Christ in the midst of the least of these
Our actions would be directed at him.

But since Jesus is incognito
The truth of our concern for the least of these
Will become transparent.

M Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*

Recounts a story I've condensed for this occasion.

"A monastery had fallen on hard times and there were only five monks left, the Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly it was a dying order.

"Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

"The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. "I know how it is" he said, "the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

"So the old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together, and spoke quietly of deep things.

"The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It has been wonderful being with you," said the

Abbot, “but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?”

“No, I am sorry,” the Rabbi responded,

I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.

“When the other monks heard the Rabbi’s words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. “The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery?”

“As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah.

“Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the dilapidated chapel.

“They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends.

“Some of the younger men who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery became once again a thriving order, and – thanks to the Rabbi’s gift – a vibrant community of light and love.”

And so, according to the teachings of Jesus
In the final analysis when he returns
And the Day of Judgment is at hand

And all people who have ever lived on earth
Are gathered before his throne

There will be a test, a test of hospitality.

Matthew 25:40 KJV And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

By the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ
May our thoughts, words, and actions
Be acceptable unto Thee.

Amen.