

When Justice and Mercy Meet

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 23, 2014

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24;
Psalm 100;
Ephesians 1.15-23;
Matthew 25.31-46

There are so many moments in life when it helps to keep your eye on the end game if you have any hope of slogging through the messy middle. I know some exhausted students who are in that space right now. Keeping their eye on graduation and the life that this education will make possible is the only way to push through. There are moments like this in parenting, in building a business, in repairing a broken relationship. So many examples come to mind where knowing where this is all heading is the only way you can find some motivation to keep going at all.

I've come to think of the Reign of Christ Sunday in a very similar vein. There are times, of course, when the convictions of our faith and the commitments of our life are bearing fruit and we can see and taste the goodness of God all around us. A child in whom you have invested begins to flourish and you can see how God's love in action is making a difference that you can measure. Years of political organizing, letter writing campaigns, protests and lobbying finally pay off and you get to watch as justice becomes the law of the land. You get a front row seat to witness the power of God at work in someone's life as you watch someone you had given up on - someone who has been hell bent on destroying their own life and everyone else's - suddenly has a change of heart and gets serious about making amends and building a new life. Sometimes we can see the reign of Christ gaining ground. In those moments our faith makes sense.

But there are others times when life is falling apart or where injustice is rampant and talk of love or reconciliation or peace or justice is nothing more than that: talk...empty...futile. When you can feel yourself just

slogging through life you need to keep your eye on the end game because you cannot see or taste the goodness of God from where you sit.

When you look at where most of the apocalyptic literature comes from (what I mean by that is passages like this one from Ezekiel and from Matthew that look ahead to the end of time) most of it comes from times of intense suffering and struggle. The prophecy from Ezekiel was shared when Israel was in exile. What the prophet offers the beleaguered people of God is this passionate rhetoric with God speaking in first person: "I myself will search for you...I will seek you out...I will rescue you...I will gather you....I will feed you..... But the fat and the strong, I will destroy. I will feed them with justice!"¹

Justice is a strong theme in these texts. And you can understand why. When you are oppressed, and beaten down, and have very little power in the world, justice becomes your only hope. You look forward to a day when justice will finally be done. In the midst of struggle and suffering, remembering where this is all headed can give you strength to carry on.

Matthew's community seemed to know something of that kind of suffering and struggle. His community had lived through some intense seasons of persecution. Its little wonder that Matthew's is the gospel that includes some of the strongest parables of judgment including this passage about the Day of Judgment when the king will come to separate the sheep from the goats.

I spent some time this week wrestling with Mathew. I was puzzling over what seems to be a contradiction in this gospel. On the one hand Matthew gives us the Sermon on the Mount. Non-violent resistance as a practice traces its roots to this gospel. Jesus' teaching to love your enemy, to pray for those who persecute you, to turn the other cheek - all of this teaching on how the mercy of God can subvert injustice comes from Matthew's gospel. Then, out of the same gospel we have some of the most violent parables you could imagine. This passage we read today is among them. It begs the question of whether God somehow shifts gears along the way.

¹ Paraphrase from Ezekiel 34.11-16

The God we know in Jesus Christ both teaches us and demonstrates for us what it looks like to resist retaliation in the face of violence and injustice. We don't just have the Sermon on the Mount, we also have Jesus on the cross. But then when it comes to the end of time, God suddenly becomes the Great Retaliator according to these parables of judgment. So which is it?

I found a great article that came out of the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University entitled *Matthew's Non-Violent Jesus and Violent Parables*.² The author offered seven different theories people bring to this conundrum. It's a very interesting article but it was her final offering that for me had the deepest resonance. What she claimed is that the parables are lifting up the consequences of living in a certain way. If you refuse to offer mercy, if you live only for yourself, if you perpetuate the cycles of violence then you will find yourself a victim of that perpetuating cycle. She offered up the parable of the unforgiving servant from Matthew 18 as the quintessential teaching along those lines.

Gordon said something very similar to that this week when we were talking about the parables of judgment with one of our seminary students. He offered that he sees these parables as wisdom literature. They aren't teaching systematic theology about the nature of God but rather are offering to us shocking stories that get us thinking deeply about how we want to live and the consequences of that way of life. It's another way of asking the question of where is this all heading?

What you notice when you spend time with this teaching from Matthew today is that eternal life (and the bible always means something more than just life after death by this phrase) - eternal life here and there is connected to an indiscriminate compassion and mercy. The ones who are called the sheep did not offer kindness because they were looking for God in the hungry and thirsty. They were not calculating how to they could earn God's favor or bolster their chances on judgment day. They were surprised by the king's assessment of their life. They simply offered

² Barabara E. Reid, O.P *Matthew's Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables* Copyright © 2006 Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.

kindness and regard to fellow human beings indiscriminately presumably because they had so deeply internalized the kindness and regard they had received from God. When you know what it is to be the recipient of God's passionate searching and seeking and gathering and feeding, you cannot help but extend that same passionate regard forward. This is who God has been from the beginning of time and this is what eternal life is made of. It becomes your way of life not because you are calculating how to get ahead but simply because it has become your DNA.

Just to keep us from getting ahead of ourselves when it comes to this passage from Matthew - to keep us from taking this too literally as a prescription for what will happen on some imagined day of judgment - if all it takes to be called a goat is to have missed one chance to offer kindness to a fellow human being in need, I suspect every single one of us would find ourselves in the company of the goats. Clearly the Day of Judgment is a day when justice and mercy will meet. The question is not what will happen on that day? The question is how will we live this day?

Here is where the prayer from Ephesians comes into play. When we can remember that Christ is the fullness who will fill all in all then there is no question of what will ultimately endure. The corrupt power of this world will not have the final word. That belongs to Christ.

There are days when we can see that the mercy and goodness and compassion of Christ is gaining ground. And there are days when we cannot.

And so we pray that God might give to us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know God, so that with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which we are called, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe.

Not a bad meditation to lead us toward Thanksgiving - is it?

Thanks be to God!