

The Everlasting Instant

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 26, 2017

Jill R. Russell

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

Last Sunday Pastor Beth began her sermon naming her top 5 most irritating characters in scripture including the master from the parable of the talents last Sunday. She recognized the dicey ground she was standing on because traditions reads the master of that parable as none other than Jesus or if not Jesus than God. Either way it's a risky business, Pastor Beth, to intentionally play a bit on the title of her sermon.

Last week's passage was a parable which gives a little a wiggle room. After all, Pastor Gordon has warned us many times when interpreting the parables of Jesus not to get too caught up in trying to press every detail in a one to one equation. So maybe we shouldn't read the master from that parable as God after all.

But this Sunday Jesus is not speaking in parables. He does not introduce this vision with his typical manner "The kingdom of heaven will be **like** this....or For it is **as if** a man, going out on a journey...." No, he begins this passage "**When** the Son of Man comes in his glory...." He goes on to talk about the Great and Final Judgment that will happen at the end of time. And concludes his sermon banishing the rejected who will "go away to eternal punishment." Jesus is in all out apocalyptic, prophet mode.

To join Pastor Beth's risky band wagon. I will come clean: I have not been a big fan of this side of Matthew's gospel.

I say "this side" because it's not the whole of Matthew's gospel. After all, Matthew gives us the Sermon on the Mount with its vision of non-violent resistance. Calling on us to love our enemies and pray for those who

persecute us while at the same time resisting their oppression. For instance, the call to turn the other cheek has long been misunderstood as passive acceptance of oppression when it is this brilliant act of defiance in their culture meant to shame the one who dared to strike you in the first place. If you're interested in the details of that interpretation, I'll share it in the footnote to this sermon when we post it on our website.¹

All that is to say that I treasure the gospel of Matthew and the teaching of Jesus found within in it. But this part – this section on Judgment - that banishes people to outer darkness is so hard to stomach that the only way I've been able to read these texts for many years is to presume that Jesus is making some kind of caricature of our insane thirst for vengeance and retaliation in order to shock us out of our addiction to this desire. I shared last week in Early Worship that I've long thought of Jesus in this part of Matthew's gospel as acting a bit like the comedian Stephen Colbert back in his Colbert Report days when he would embody the attitudes of the day in a way that you could not help but see how twisted and ridiculous those attitudes truly are

Needless to say, it's this last bit about judgment that has always tripped me up when hearing this text. So much so that the main point here, which is about how God wants for us to live, gets lost in all the hand wringing. Do we take Matthew 25 and its insistence that we will be judged according to our works of love or do we take Matthew 20 and its insistence that by God's grace the last will be treated as the first? Is it grace or is it works? Which is it? Friends, that is not the question of this text...but it is the place that so many of us – myself obviously included - get stuck.

The question of this text is how will we respond when we encounter Jesus. I don't mean on the final day of judgment. I mean right here, right now, in the ordinary course of daily life. The texts asks how will we encounter

¹ Barbara A. Reid, professor of New Testament at Catholic Theological Seminary, wrote an article entitled "Matthew's Non-Violent Jesus & Violent Parables." In it she points out that people would only hit with the right hand. So when a person of power wanted to humiliate a slave, he would hit with the back of his right hand. To turn the other cheek was to present the person with a dilemma. "Turning the other cheek is a provocative response that robs the aggressor of the power to humiliate. Instead, the one who intended to shame ends up shamed. In this way a less powerful person is able to reciprocate—dishonor for dishonor. In so doing, the subordinate one interrupts the cycle of violence, which is the first step toward restoration of justice."
<https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/ParablesArticleReid.pdf>

Jesus through the in-the-flesh-needs of people and of self who are at their most vulnerable.

There is no question that we have become unbelievably polarized in the world of politics about which values will sit at the center of our shared life together as a community and nation. A movement has sprung up based on this text called the Matthew 25 Pledge that invites individuals and congregations to make the promise that we will stand with vulnerable people and will make that commitment visible in tangible ways and we will not let any political polarization stop us from these things.

We will get water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, visitation for those who are hurting by going to them “in their confinement.” I appreciated the commentator who described the ministry of visitation in this way: a willingness to go to people “in their confinement when they are not in productive circulation or attractive or strategic, indeed when they are socially shamed or peripheral.”² So, yes those in prison, and also those who are confined by all manner of different circumstances.

I appreciate those who have been taking these values into politics and community action and activism – many of us are trying to be about that work right now. I have a clergy friend who ran for the governor of his state. He was so fed up with the politics on both sides of the aisle that he ran as a third party candidate on the platform “The Last are First”³....for real!

Do you know what is beautiful about this vision Jesus has for us? Any one of us can do these things. You don't have to have power. You don't have to run for office. You don't have to have an advanced degree or superior intellect or unbelievable skills. You can simply respond with love to the people in front of you whether you have this whole God thing figured out or whether this theology about judgment is driving you crazy. It makes no difference! This text calls for our response.

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary, Volume 2: The Church Book Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, revised and expanded 2004), 569.

³ <https://www.kaperdaleforgovernor.com/>

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, on this culmination of the church year, we are often invited to take the wide-angle view; to take our eyes off the troubling reality of this present moment where people's need is more often met with indifference if not hostility rather than love and to gaze instead in our mind's eye on the eternal glory when Christ will reign and love will rule. We began in that cosmic space when we sang "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun" with a vision of love and blessing so pervasive that sounds of "praise pour from the mouths of infants and where prisoners leap to loose their chains, the weary find eternal rest and all who suffer want are blessed." That's what this day is often about: look to the end game to where this is all heading. Look to the Christ who is and will finally be honored as the sovereign of all creation.

Here's the thing about Matthew 25, it makes the claim that this vast and cosmic vision can be experienced right here and right now every single time we respond in love to the need that is before us. Every time someone recognizes our vulnerable places and meets our need with love and every time we see someone in their vulnerability and respond with grace, we get a glimpse, a foretaste, a piece of the everlasting right in this instant.

The choir should recognize that I stole my sermon title from their anthem. I had been wrestling for days with all of this paradox in the gospel of Matthew and then turned in the bulletin to the anthem for the day and was blown away. As much as I would like to resolve the tensions in Matthew's gospel, I'm learning to let them to stand. I suspect the community to whom Matthew wrote his gospel - who had long been reading the letters of Paul and knew the theology of "grace alone"; he saw the need to recover some of the fire in Jesus's teaching.⁴ Yes God meets our failure with grace and forgiveness. The last will be first. And then God expects to do something with that grace; to let it fuel a life of love that is always looking for the face of Jesus and knows where to look which is the places we often want to avoid - the places of our own vulnerability and the places of other people's need. That is where Jesus lives.

⁴ This observation about the connection of Paul's writings which were written and circulated much earlier in the church than the writing and circulation of Matthew's gospel was made by Bruner, 577.

We began this service with the wide-angle view and the glory of eternity with “Jesus Shall Reign Where’re the Sun” and will conclude with a much tighter focus in a very simple song: “Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbor we have from you.”

On the way we will hear the choir bring us into the tension of the paradox of who Christ is to us.

Offertory *Christus Paradox*

Alfred Fedak
text by Sylvia Dunstan

You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd.
You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and swordbringer
Of the way you took and gave.
You the everlasting instant;
 You, whom we both scorn and crave.
Clothed in light upon the mountain,
Stripped of might upon the cross,
Shining in eternal glory,
Beggard by a soldier’s toss
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are both gift and cost.
You, who walk each day beside us,
Sit in power at God’s side.
You, who preach a way that’s narrow,
Have a love that reaches wide.
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are our pilgrim guide.
Worthy is our earthly Jesus!
Worthy is our cosmic Christ!
Worthy your defeat and vict’ry.
Worthy still your peace and strife.
You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are our death and life.
Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.
You, who are our death and our life.

Praise be to God!