

Good morning, and may the peace of Christ be with you,

Many of you have heard me preach before, so it may come as a surprise that I still get nervous each and every time I am asked to do this. Some of you know what I do for a living, that I work as a welfare fraud investigator, so it is important to know that lessons like today are sometimes the hardest for me to come to grips with. It is very hard, when you see obvious misdeeds every day, to not come to think that every allegation that you receive is true. In my work I often wish that I had the natural empathy of my wife, who once read Charlotte's Web and now sees that magic in every spider. So know that I am preaching to myself and then sharing my conversation with you.

Today's lesson has been described by scholars not as a parable, but as an apocalyptic prediction, a story that depicts the final judgment and clarifies the criteria by which the judgment will be made. So when pastor gave us his excellent sermon on the apocalypse last week, I knew that I was going to have to change my message. Today's reading however, is still very much a parable in its structure, matching the other teachings of Jesus in that, while it does describe the final judgment, it leaves us with an answer that requires much deeper thought.

When I read today's gospel, preparing to write down my thoughts on it, the first thing that came into my mind was, "Well of course I want to be a sheep, so how do I go about finding who these least ones are that Jesus is speaking about." But that is the problem, and the trap of this particular parable. In attempting to identify whom the least ones are as precisely as possible, I am putting myself squarely in the pen with the goats, not the sheep. As with so many of the teachings of Jesus, it is not supposed to be understood with the mind, but written on the heart.

In the teachings of our Lord, it is not enough to identify whom the least ones are. Instead, we should be identifying with them. You have heard me speak before on the fear of the "other", and that is the same with this teaching. A goat is looking at the other as different than themselves, while a sheep isn't looking for the "other" at all. Just as earlier in Matthew, both groups of bridesmaids had fallen asleep, both the sheep and the goats fail to identify Jesus in the people they encountered. The question that the sheep asked, "When did we give you something to eat or drink?" is a question asked out of genuine surprise. It is a surprise because the sheep didn't see Jesus in the world around them, they saw themselves in the actions that they took, in helping whomever they came across. This is the spirit as written in the heart. The question that the goats asked, "When did we fail to help you when you were hungry?" is a question asked out of genuine indignation. It is asked in shock, because surely the goat would have helped Jesus, if they had but known the reward, or the punishment, in the end.

This wasn't solely a problem of Jesus' day. Indeed it sounds a lot like the world we live

in, and as has been pointed out many times before, the Bible is the living word, speaking to the human condition. It was not just the Pharisees who attempted to pin Jesus down on a specific answer, in most cases in the teachings of our Lord, it was his disciples who were questioning him, and it was his disciples to whom he was speaking. That is also a greater part of this message that we should carry with us, that in looking for the villain in the story, we become that villain.

This lesson has been called a bookend, because in the gospel of Matthew, our Lord Jesus began his teaching with the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." Jesus began his teaching by telling his disciples who the "least" were, but just as it is when you point your finger at somebody else, it is only to find three fingers pointing back at yourself. And so it is in this, the final teaching of our Lord Jesus, that his words come full circle.

While searching for a story that summarizes this gospel message, I ran across a blog post by a man named Randy Boardman. It has 4 very short stories that I think illuminate today's lesson.

When I travel through airports, I notice folks who may seem invisible. For example, have you ever paid attention to the attendants who are stationed in airport bathrooms? In the men's rooms, some have a table and mouthwash. Their job is to keep the bathroom they're assigned to clean, sanitary and nice for us to visit for only a few minutes. Can you imagine how nasty an airport bathroom could become in just one day, if these folks were not so strategically positioned. By mentioning this, I'm not trying in any way to diminish anyone's value, station in life or contribution to the greater good. Instead, I try to go out of my way to say hello, tell them "thank you". Their response is often one of amazement that someone noticed they were there.

A caregiver told the following story. She worked in a setting that cares for persons with dementia. She shared that a lady she supports was at a medical appointment with her daughter. The doctor carried on for quite some time, and dispensed an inordinate amount of diagnostic observations, medical terminology and advice to the daughter. The mother waited patiently for this very learned physician to finish. He then asked the daughter if she had any questions about her mother's situation. The mother with dementia said, "I'm still in here. So now that you told my daughter all that stuff, can you please tell me?"

Have you ever been walking and encountered folks who are homeless? Have you ever crossed to the other side of the street, or avoided eye contact, and pretended they were not really there? I have, and I was not proud of myself when I did. I was in downtown Indianapolis, and was walking out of a restaurant after a meal. I noticed a couple quietly sitting on the sidewalk, with a sign that said, "Homeless vet. No job. No food." So this time, I decided to engage. I asked if I could sit down and talk to them for a while. I had a bag of leftovers and asked if they minded if I left the food. The man immediately gave the leftovers to his wife. As he began to talk, I just listened. He thanked me for the food and just for stopping. He went on to tell me how he had served in Iraq, came home and worked construction. As the economy tightened, both he and his wife had lost their jobs, their home and much of their dignity. This young man placed his life in harm's way, for me, and for you. He thanked me repeatedly for the food, for stopping and listening to his story. I thanked him repeatedly for his service. He did not need my pity, just my respect.

A number of years ago at a school for students with special needs, I had a conversation with a 13-year-old student. He was a person with Down syndrome. When he asked to talk to me one day, he said "I know I am not all that smart because I have that syndrome thing, and guess I will have it for quite a while. But I just hate it when people talk to me like I am stupid"

We have choices each and every day with those we encounter. They may have had different opportunities than we have had. When provided the chance, consider what you can do to help others become more visible, how you can talk to, not through others, how you can respect, not disrespect a person in need, and how to value, not devalue those who do not appear just like us. Remember, "I'm not invisible, I'm still in here, I still matter, and I'm not stupid."

Ultimately, today's lessons teach us to stop looking for Jesus, stop wishing you could meet him face to face, and instead realize that you see Jesus in every single person you encounter. Start seeing Jesus not only in those that give to the poor, but also those that are receiving the gift. Start seeing Jesus not only in the nurse, but also in the patient. Start seeing Jesus in those who annoy you, and realize as well that Jesus is there in those you annoy. Start seeing Jesus in the people who agree with our political opinions, and those who clearly do not. Start seeing Jesus in those that have hurt you, and also see Jesus in those you have hurt. Start seeing Jesus not only in the ones you love, but also in the ones you do not. Remember to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and remember how big our neighborhood really is.