“The Least of these, My Brothers”
Matthew 25:31-46

A Sermon Delivered
By
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.”

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One of the real blessings of living here in Annapolis and especially on the Yard – and there are many - is going to Naval Academy football games. I’ve especially enjoyed watching our quarterback, Keenan Reynolds. If you know anything about our offense, you know that it takes a very special and talented kind of athlete to run our offense as a quarterback. And Keenan has undertaken that role masterfully in a way that gives other teams major problems…which is a good thing. When I watch Keenan I’m sometimes reminded of my own attempt to be a quarterback that didn’t pan out so well. I had just entered high school and on the first day of try-outs, thought I’d give it a go. So our coach took all the guys who wanted to play quarterback and ran us through some initial drills to evaluate us. He had us throw the ball to see how good our arm was. Then he had us take snaps from the center and drop back so he could watch our footwork. And finally he had us put it all together - roll out and throw the ball on the run. And this is where I showed my true colors. I was slow to roll out, and couldn’t hit the target. The ball looked sort of like a dying goose that had just been shot by a hunter. After the final drill the Coach said to me and two or three other guys who didn’t fare so well, “Why don’t you come over here to the offensive line. I think you’ll make a better contribution there.” He was trying to be nice, but the truth is, I was never going to be a quarterback. I wasn’t built for it, didn’t have the speed for it, and wasn’t fit for the position. And no matter how nice he was, or how he spun it, in his correct judgment, I was not qualified.

We tend to not like making distinctions or judgments about people. We tend to shy away from even suggesting people are not qualified or don’t measure up to some standard. I recently read where a teachers’ union suggested never talking about a student’s failure, but rather we should talk about “deferred success.” The idea of judging people is not popular. We don’t like to talk about it; especially God judging people. And yet in our Gospel today, Jesus says there is going to be a judgment where all peoples of the world – you and me – will stand before God and be evaluated. And the basis upon which Jesus will judge us may surprise you. In Matthew 25 verse 31, Jesus says that when the Son of Man comes into glory, all the nations will be gathered
before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. It’s an image with which the people would have been familiar. In the ancient world, sheep were of greater value than goats. And there were some obvious differences. Most sheep don’t have horns; all goats have horns. Sheep have wool; goats have hair. Sheep eat grass; goats eat twigs and branches. And at night, goats huddle together to keep warm. However sheep want open space to graze freely. Because of this, shepherds each evening would reach into their flocks with their crook and separate the sheep to open pasture from the goats who would cling together.

This is what we’re told the Son of Man will do with us – he’ll separate us. To the sheep, Jesus will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” But to the goats, he will say, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. We ought to let this image sink in for a moment. Jesus is telling us that a day is coming, when he will make a judgment call, a distinction. Like that shepherd, he’ll say “You…but not you.” “You, yes, but not you.” It’s an image of Jesus that we rarely ever consider. Many years ago I was asked to speak at a church in the San Diego area. It appeared to be an active church, with lots of people among several services. Before the service, the staff asked me to come and join them in prayer. I walked down a hall and joined what was a group of ministers and other lay-leaders all tightly huddled together. I don’t remember if there was a prayer, but what I do remember is that the leader asked us all to put our hands in the middle of the group, like a team would before a game, and all at once the whole group shouted…”Go… God!” I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Not that the Lord is not our great encourager. He is the spirit of encouragement. And not that the Lord does not get excited when we honor him; He rejoices. But he is more than that. He is the Lord God of heaven and earth. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end; the Son of Man who dwells in unapproachable light.

Revelation tells us that when he comes in glory, he will come with eyes like flaming fire, feet of burnished bronze, his voice will be like the sound of many waters. In his right hand, he’ll hold sevens stars, and from his mouth will come a two-edged sword which is the word of God. And his face will shine with the strength of the sun. Have we dwelt on that image? Jesus Christ is not a cheerleader who merely claps for whatever we do or whatever decisions we make, or however we choose to live. As we confess every Sunday, he is the judge, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. If we really consider this about who Jesus is, it will arrest us. In fact, there are times we should perhaps leave chapel more disturbed than anything else - disturbed about where our lives are, disturbed about the sin we so casually entertain before him. Do you remember what Peter cried out when the realization sank in of who Jesus was? Overcome with his own
sinfulness, he cried, “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” There will be a judgment and Jesus, the Son of Man, will weigh our lives in the balance.

The basis of his judgment is surprising. Jesus says in effect, we will either enter the kingdom of heaven, or be cast into eternal fire based upon how we treated him. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come…take your inheritance…For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” But to those who DID NOT do these things, he will say, “Depart from me…” It’s vitally important that we understand what Jesus is saying here. He’s not talking principally about how we’ve treated the poor or people in need in general. Yes, we should be meeting the needs of the poor and marginalized around us, and there is plenty in the Bible that speaks to that reality. However, Jesus asserts a qualifier in this passage. Note he says, “for whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” And, “whatever you DID NOT DO for one of the least of these, you did NOT DO for me.’ Jesus is talking specifically about those whom he counts as brothers and sisters, and in fact it’s because they are his brothers and sisters that they are hungry and thirsty and naked and strangers, sick and in prison. Jesus has in mind, believers, the people of God who confess him, the household of faith who often suffer for their faith. The point is, how we’ve treated these our fellow Christians among us…that is the basis upon which we’ll be judged.

Now some of you hear this and may be saying, ”Hold on a moment. I thought we are saved by faith. It sounds like you’re saying that we’re saved by works or deeds.” I’m glad you raised that issue, because on the one hand you’re exactly right. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. There is no work or deed or philanthropic gesture that ever saves us. When the crowds came to Jesus in John 6 and asked him what work must they do to inherit eternal life, his answer was clear: “This is the work you must do – believe in him whom God has sent.” It is our belief in Jesus Christ and our acceptance of what he did for us on the cross that saves us. However if we have truly believed in Jesus, if we have trusted him as our Lord and savior, heard his knock upon our hearts, and invited him into our lives…there will be a difference! There will be a change. There will be fruit, evidence, good deeds done for others, especially for the people of God.

As an illustration, let me ask, how many of you have dogs? What happens every time the dog gets wet? He shakes and water goes everywhere! If you have experienced Jesus Christ in your life; have been washed and cleansed, and immersed in his love, you are going to get other people wet. There will be a natural overflow of your life into the lives of others. This is what Jesus meant when he said in John 7, “He who believes in me, as
the Scripture says, from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.” This is why there is such a great surprise in our passage. Notice that when Jesus welcomes the sheep into his kingdom, they’re surprised: “They say, “Lord, WHEN did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? WHEN did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? WHEN did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” They are surprised because their love for him was never calculated or measured. They were never focused on their good deeds; that wasn’t the point. No, they saw a need and they met it. Their love was the natural overflow of their faith. This doesn’t mean we don’t work at the way we love and welcome people. The Scripture does say we are to “practice hospitality” for example. But our works are not done to earn God’s favor, but from love and loyalty.

On the other hand, notice the reaction of the wicked: “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, AND NOT help you?” For them, it was ALWAYS about what they did, and they were keenly aware of it. It was about their own sense of doing good, their own righteousness. It’s like the Pharisee, who prayed aloud for everyone to hear him: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and give a tenth of all I get.” But this man, said Jesus, went away unjustified before God. Let me say something to you of great importance. I want to say it gently, but clearly: If you are relying on your faith in Jesus to save you…maybe you prayed a prayer once…but you’re carrying on in your life however you want with no thought for others and no efforts to reach out to other Christians, the Bible gives you no assurance that you belong to God – none. 1st John 4:7-8, says “Everyone who loves, has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” Loving others is not the reason you are saved, but it is the evidence that you are saved. In practical terms, I see three groups of people whom we ought to be loving if our faith is real:

(A) First we ought to be loving all believers with whom we have contact. Galatians 6:10 “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (the household of faith).” The Psalmist says, “O Lord, I hate the assembly of evildoers...But I love the house where you live, and the place where your glory dwells.” If our faith is real, and we are to be counted sheep, then we too will love God’s house and his sheep. We’ll have an eye for believers wherever we go. Midshipmen, this means in your companies, amidst all the posturing and at times cruel treatment that goes on in Bancroft, you’ll be looking for other Christians to love and support. For all of us, it means that while we love all peoples, we will especially love those in the Body of Christ; for in that brother or sister, whoever they are, THERE is Jesus Christ Himself. After the service, volunteers are going to set up stations in this chapel were you can learn more
about how you can bless others that are a part of this congregation. This is not the only way to love others, but it is A WAY and a very well-lit path to demonstrating that kind of love that characterizes God’s faithful sheep.

(B) A second group whom we ought to be loving if our faith is real are all those who are being persecuted for following Christ – those who because of their witness - endure the kind of suffering of which our passage speaks. They go without, are alienated, hungry, poor, in need. A few months ago I mentioned that over 1 million Christians had been martyred in the last 10 years worldwide. Are we loving our fellow believers who suffer for the gospel? Are we praying for them, visiting them, standing with them? I’ve often noticed that when a public figure comes out and says something about his or her Christian faith or makes a judgment about our sinful culture, they’re often left alone. Even Christians, fearing the spirit of the age, seem to distance themselves. It happens in the military all the time. Brothers and sisters, when we see a fellow believer in public or in Bancroft Hall, or the Pentagon, confessing his or her faith, we ought to love them, write them a note, speak up on their behalf, rejoice and draw strength from their faith. The Apostle Paul says we are to be “fools for Christ.” For we are not those who shrink back in cowardice, “but those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.” (Hebrews 10:39)

(C) Finally, we ought to be loving ministers, missionaries, evangelists, pastors, yes chaplains, all those whose work involves taking the gospel to others (and often in desperate and dangerous places). On January 5th 2012, I was in Kabul Afghanistan and about to ride in a convoy to the south side of the city to meet with some troops who needed a chaplain’s visit. It was the most dangerous place in Kabul; in fact just 2 months earlier, at the very place where we were going, 14 Americans were killed as a vehicle-born device detonated, killing all but one in a heavily armored vehicle. Our team was going to that same place in SUVs. The night before as I was readying myself, I received an email from a dear woman who has prayed for me for over 20 years, and who in her own life has known great pain and suffering. She had no idea where I was and where I would be going the next day. This is what her email said.

Dear Carey, I have not ceased in my prayers...in finding God's strength to stand the watch. Now, this verse has been burning in my spirit for you. "I am your shield." (Gen 15:1) Here in these four words I found Almighty God’s declaration... I have pondered this for days. Four words Lord? That is all I have to write to him? I have waited, spent time in front of this computer waiting. Appears this is it, for this time where you are and what God is calling you towards. Stay outside the wire. [“I am your shield.”]

The next morning, as our team got ready to roll outside the wire, I got my guys together and I read this email and told them, “We’re going to be OK.” God is our Shield. I share that with you, because that’s love. That
email sent to me that night was a sister in Christ “loving one of the least of these” for the kingdom of God; and
great will be her reward.

So I leave you this morning with a question…If you were to be put on trial for being a follower of Jesus
Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Jesus says, one day, you and I will be on trial. And if
we have loved him and his people and served them with gladness, then on that day, the great Advocate Jesus
Christ himself, will stand at the trial and speak on your behalf, and say “Yes, this one is mine, for when I was
hungry you fed me, when I was a stranger you invited me in, when I was sick and in prison for the gospel you
visited me, for what you did for the least of these my brothers, you did for me. Come, you who are blessed by
 the Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

I want to hear those words.

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.