

No One Expected This

Scripture texts:

- *Ezekiel 34:1-16*
- *Matthew 25:31-46*

Rev. Gordon Lindsey

Right after I was discharged from the army in 1968, I moved to England to study theology for one year. In the college I attended I became friends with a fellow English student. His name was Andrew Dawson.

On holidays, like Christmas, Andrew invited me back to his home. His family lived in a small English village outside Cambridge.

His parents were gentry. They lived in a historic house. One-half dated back to the 16th century. It still retained its thatch roof. The other half was built in the 18th century.

We ate meals in a dining room dominated by a massive 17th century oak table. It gleamed from the many waxes it had received through the centuries. The family silver sat on the fireplace mantle and was taken down and used at every meal.

Andrew's mother was warden of the village church. Over dinner she would tell me stories about life in their local church, especially stories about the peculiar beliefs some of the villagers had about death and burials.

For example, many in the village believed that if you were cremated, you would not rise in the resurrection. You can imagine their dismay when one of the elderly ladies in town died and was cremated.

Her friends were certain that this was due to her daughter's malevolence. Clearly the daughter did not want to meet her mother in the resurrection. Then it came out that the deceased woman had requested cremation. Well, then, the gossips said, there must have been so much rancor

between her and her daughter that she did not want to meet her daughter again.

The village cemetery circled the church. At some time in the past, it had been divided into two halves: one for the so-called sheep; the other for the so-called goats.

The problem, Mrs. Dawson said, was the sheep side had become so crowded that they now had to bury people on the goat side. This was causing great alarm among the villagers.

Now where did this quaint practice of dividing the dead among the sheep and the goats come from? Well, it came from the gospel passage we read this morning.

This reading is not only memorable, but it has been highly influential in Christian history. For it is the principal description of the Last Judgment in the New Testament. It describes that judgment as a separation of sheep from goats.

Almost every artistic rendition of the Last Judgment in Christian art draws its inspiration from this story. So I'd like to take a few moments to analyze it so we better understand what it is trying to say to us.

The first thing we must keep in mind about this story is that it is not a literal description of the Last Judgment. It is a parable, like the two parables we heard for the last two Sundays.

What the Last Judgment will be like in fact, none of us can say with any certainty. Jesus teaches using evocative imagery, not literal facts.

The judge is pictured as a king upon a throne. I am sure Matthew meant us to take this as King Jesus. But notice how the story presents Jesus' kingship--in the image of a shepherd. The judge is the same Good Shepherd who gave his own life for his sheep. That should shape how

we understand Jesus' kingship on this Sunday we call Christ the King Sunday.

The shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. But notice that both groups—the sheep as well as the goats--are surprised by their fate. The Last Judgment is pictured in a sense as a big surprise. No one quite expects what happens. Kind of like what happened in the recent election when so many pollsters were shown wrong in their predictions.

Jesus is telling his disciples not to become complacent about where they will be when the king settles final accounts and ushers in the kingdom of God.

We can always be confident in God's love for us. But that is no warrant that since we have been saved by Christ's death and resurrection, we have no responsibility for the way we live our life as Christian disciples. Our behavior does indeed have some eternal consequences.

Also notice the criteria the judge uses to separate the two classes of people. In this story, what separates the sheep from the goats is not their exact religious beliefs nor religious practices, but their actions in showing compassion to the most vulnerable members of our community.

The goats in fact are not condemned for evil crimes they have committed. They are not people who have murdered, defrauded, and committed adultery. Rather they are condemned for sins of omission, for actions that they did not do.

Jesus' disciples will be held accountable not only for what we do, but for what we do not do. In this parable apathy and indifference are serious sins.

It reminds me of that great sports scandal that happened back about ten years ago. That was the sexual abuse scandal in the Penn State football program. Joe Paterno was fired as head coach not because of any act of

sexual abuse he personally committed, but because he failed to report abuse of which he had become aware. His acts of omission are what got him into trouble. So it is with the goats in the parable.

Finally the criteria the judge uses turn out to be the ways we live our ordinary, daily lives. Jesus does not condemn the goats for not performing great miracles or not building spectacular cathedrals or not converting thousands in evangelistic campaigns.

The goats are condemned for simple acts of omission: for not giving a drink to a thirsty man, for not visiting a sick woman, for not providing clothes to a homeless child, for not visiting an imprisoned mother, for not welcoming a outsider who enters our town.

The realm where the judge is keeping his eye on us is exactly our daily, ordinary lives. The little things we do in caring for our families, our neighbors, and the vulnerable in our community are not meaningless. No, they are weighed down with eternal significance.

That's why I hear Jesus suggesting it is vitally important that we make a habit of performing these seemingly minor acts of compassion in our daily lives.

Making a habit of these practices means we are building our Christian character. And our character becomes the grounding for our daily actions.

Soldiers, for example, go through endless training on how to act in the midst of battle. When I was in basic training, we practiced the same actions over and over again, like fixing bayonets rapidly for hand-to-hand combat.

Why this endless repetition? Because through this boring repetition, our trainers were instilling these actions as habits. So that when the crisis of

battle came, we did not have to pause to figure out what they would do. Such a pause might prove deadly. Instead we would do it from instinct.

By practicing these minor acts of compassion, Jesus sees his disciples building the habits that give a Christian character to our lives.

And with such a character as the grounding of our personalities, we don't need to spend hours figuring out what is the right thing to do when we are confronted with new, unexpected challenges. Good ethics have been instilled in us by habits of doing good.

In that respect, teaching ethics is similar to teaching good manners. We learn the right thing to do in life by doing it over and over again until it becomes instinctual.

Let us not devalue, therefore, the importance of developing character in our Christian life. We are building character daily by the many small ethical decisions we make every day and every hour.

Most Bible students read this parable of Jesus as a parable about individuals at the Last Judgment. But again notice a small detail in the story. What is gathered into this great courtroom is not just a crowd of individuals, but all the nations of the world.

What is on trial here are not just individuals, but societies as well. Societies as societies are also held accountable, especially for how they meet the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of their community.

Here Jesus is at one with the message of the Hebrew prophets, like the passage we heard in Ezekiel today. According to these ancient prophets, ancient Israel is sent into exile for two sins. One is the sin of idolatry.

The other is the sin of social injustice, especially the failure of society to care for and watch out for its most vulnerable. Those vulnerable are

summarized in the stock Biblical phrase: the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner.

Now we might translate that Biblical phrase into the vulnerable in our society. They may include not only the economically poor, but also such people as invalids confined to home; children of all kinds, but especially children with physical or mental handicaps; prisoners in our prisons; elderly residents of nursing homes; and immigrants.

The Bible does not specify exactly how we must take care of these people. It does not say that we must do so through government programs, a welfare state, non-profit organizations, churches, or local cooperatives.

We are given great freedom to determine how we meet the needs of the vulnerable in our society. But what the Hebrew prophets and Jesus do not allow is for us to evade or deny our responsibility.

In their eyes, every society has a responsibility to its vulnerable. We may engage in healthy debate on what is most effective in serving the needy, whether government programs or other ways of service. But in the thought world of the Bible, that society has a responsibility for caring for its needy is an immutable given.

I say this because in some of the debates going on in our country in recent years we have heard many proposals that we should cut government services to the poor and vulnerable. A particular target has been Obamacare, the government program to extend medical insurance to many who are uninsured.

I am not here to argue that Obamacare is perfect and must be retained. Maybe it should be abolished and replaced, but only if we can offer alternate and more effective ways of meeting the needs of our vulnerable. What I fear is that many who wish to cut government services to the vulnerable are doing so so they can evade any social

responsibility for the poor and needy. That is not an option the Hebrew prophets or Jesus will permit.

The things Jesus praises in today's text can appear to be very ordinary. What's so special about giving a person a drink of water? Or visiting our neighbor suffering from a chronic disease like MS? They involve no extraordinary acts of sainthood as we have come customarily to think of sainthood.

They look more like human beings being fully and compassionately alive. And that is, in a sense, what a saint is. As an early church father named Irenaeus put it, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."¹

The place and time where we are called to live out the life of Christian discipleship is here and now. Never let us devalue our present lives, no matter how ordinary they may seem. They are where we are being transformed from goats into sheep, from people spiritually asleep to people vividly awake. Thanks be to God. Amen.

-- The Rev. Gordon Lindsey
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¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*