

April 7, 2019
Jesus and the Disinherited
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Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Dr. Kate Edgerton-Tarpley is an alumna of IU and UBC, now a university professor in California. Chinese history is her specialty, and she also teaches world history. She once had a student who attended the first day of the semester and the final, which he failed. He then came to her office hours and begged her to give him a D-. She refused. He

continued begging, until eventually his wife called, harassing Kate for a D. Kate did not budge, saying, “*I do not hand out grades willy-nilly. My students earn their D’s fair and square!*” At the risk of pushing the metaphor too far, “The Sheep and Goats” is Jesus’ last lecture – the one in which the professor answers the inevitable question, “*Will this be on the final?*”

Let me tell you how that works, Jesus says. The Son of Man will gather together *panta ta ethne*, “all the nations” – *All the Gentiles, The whole world, All the nations* – and sort them out like a shepherd sorting sheep from goats. Not a hard job, really; they don’t look that much alike. Which is interesting to think about. The nations who do God’s will look nothing like those who don’t . . . to the Son of Man. I wonder if goats and sheep look different to one another? If they are surprised to find out they’re different?

We moderates get all itchy about this passage. We love social justice texts and hate hellfire eschatology, so Judgment texts like this put us in a bind. We like long essay tests with which to show off our exegesis and preen our mastery of nuance. But that is not this test. For this test, we show up ready to present ourselves, only to be handed our grade. We’ve already passed or failed, and there is nothing else to do. Nothing to do but receive our inheritance, that which has been ours from the beginning of the story.

Let’s pray. *Good God, we pray to live as people who have read your word, heard your voice, and know your will. Amen.*

Howard Thurman’s book *Jesus and the Disinherited* is theological and exegetical analysis of being black and Christian in 1930’s America. Specifically – how to live alongside the white Christians who mistreated them and still **BE** Christian. A glance at the book suggests that *the disinherited* are black people – those disenfranchised socially, economically, and politically. Such an assumption, however, requires ignorance of Dr. Thurman’s primary text, which is the gospel of Jesus. Because in the gospel of Jesus, Matthew 25:31-46, the disinherited are not the victims of disenfranchisement but, rather, the enforcers of that disenfranchisement. Not the have-nots, but the haves. Not the weak, but the strong. And not ALL of the strong. Some of the strong.

Are half the nations sheep? Two-thirds? Three-fourths? Like so much in this passage, we are not given to know. It is an after-the-fact passage, like after the professor’s grades are turned in. They are what they are. “You get what you get, and you don’t throw a fit.”

Actually, you CAN throw a fit if you want, but it's not going to change anything now. It's the hardest part of preaching this text – not preaching what isn't here. Not preaching the argument Jesus won't have on Judgment Day. I've written and thrown away pages and pages of that argument. I have so many questions, so many points I want to make. About social justice. About what sheep do right and goats do wrong.

Thursday night, the deacons' meeting helped me get over it – Deacon Jodi's devotions, actually. About a mystic who prayed for fifteen years to know what God was trying to tell her. *Love*, God finally said, if you really want to know. *Did God finally say it or did she finally hear it*, I wondered. The difference doesn't matter. Faith takes however long it takes. We can fight this text till Judgment Day, but on that day we won't fight it any more. We will understand that we've no more sway over God than do these sheep and goats – animals beside whom we think ourselves so much smarter.

This text is the same text today that it will be on Judgment Day – however long it takes us to come around. But we will come around. And by *us*, I do mean *panta ta ethne, all of us*. We cannot count ourselves among those who did not know. We've known since the first day of class what would be on this test. Remember? The Beatitudes? Jesus ends where he began, with kindness toward the weaker ones: the hungry, thirsty, needy, sick, the refugee, and the prisoner.

You may be surprised the test is already over, but you cannot possibly be surprised to discover what material would be covered. So please don't pretend you are. Don't pretend you are by pretending the story is about something that it isn't. Live the life that Jesus is going to know that you lived or not. Be kind. Be decently kind. Be dignifyingly kind. Be seriously, intentionally, actively, wildly, materially, hugely kind. Be riskily kind. Be boldly kind. Be bravely kind. Be crazy kind.

Because, in the end, the inheritance that all of us believe we're after anyway goes to those who understood that kindness was all that very really mattered to God in the first place. Within the veil and the transaction of kindness is where God is always found.

Would you pray with me?