

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, 11/26/2017, Matthew 25:31-46 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

When I came back to church as an adult, I first attended a Methodist church in the Fox Hill area of Hampton, Virginia. It was a loving neighborhood church, and they welcomed me, even though I wasn't from there. I had only been living in Virginia for about a year at that time, and was taken by how beautiful the accents were, so different than the Southern accents I heard portrayed in movies or on TV.

I was in a fellowship group at that church once while today's Gospel passage was read, and I remember being distracted because the reader, a dear and devout woman I respected enormously, pronounced the word "naked" as "nekkid." "I was nekkid" "Lord, when were you nekkid?" I was upset with myself because I was distracted from this passage by her pronunciation. In fact, I was so focused on nekkid that I didn't even notice the sheep and the goats.

The past two Sundays, our parables have looked toward Christ's second coming. This one does as well. Today is the very last Sunday of this church year, Christ the King Sunday, also known as the Reign of God Sunday. This parable of the sheep and the goats is Jesus' last parable in the Gospel of Matthew. After this, he moves towards Jerusalem and crucifixion.

Jesus has been teaching his disciples, through parables, what to expect for his second coming. In this one, we see that when the second coming is here, there will be people who fed the hungry, gave the thirsty something to drink, welcomed the stranger, clothed the nekkid, cared for the sick, visited the prisoner. Unfortunately, when Christ comes again, there will also be people who aren't doing those things.

That does not give us an excuse not to do those things. Would you rather be a sheep or a goat?

This parable seems pretty straightforward: reach out to others. Then you're reaching out to Jesus. The end amen.

The thing about Jesus' parables, though, is that they aren't simple. They aren't clear morality tales. They are designed to make us think. We can read them on different levels, and different people will hear different things at different times. We can read them from the perspective of different characters. We could devote our whole lives to the study of Jesus' parables.

One twist that prevents this particular parable from being understood strictly as a straight morality tale—do good to others, or else you're going to hell—is that neither the sheep nor the goats knew what they were doing.

I got caught up on that word "nekkid" the time I heard it at a Methodist gathering because it is used *four* times in this passage. Jesus counts the things to the righteous—hungry, thirsty, stranger, nekkid, sick, in prison— and then they *recount* them back to Jesus: when did this

happen, hungry/thirsty/stranger/nekkid/sick/in prison? Then he does the same thing with the goats.

They were clueless: *both* the sheep and the goats. They were feeding Jesus, or not feeding Jesus, and they had no idea.

They didn't know that the second coming wasn't only a far-off event, when the reign of Christ would come about. Christ was already there, is already here, hungry and thirsty and a stranger and nekkid and sick and in prison.

How are we supposed to recognize him? How can we spot "the least of these"?

You know, people call the church daily seeking assistance. Some of these people are really good at it. My last church was across the street from a hospital, and sometimes people would come over right after they were discharged, or at least they would say that they had just been discharged from the hospital.

I wasn't the rector there. I was the assistant. My boss the rector instructed the parish administrator, Judie, who some of you have met—we're close friends—my boss the rector told Judie not to let them get to me, because I was susceptible to sad stories, and many had perfected them.

There were also a lot of volunteers answering the phone and the doors at church, so sometimes people got in to see me anyway. One was a woman just out of the hospital. She was so sick she could barely walk, so I didn't make her leave my office to do the kind of screening I normally would do. She had something like seven kids and one was a newborn and there was asbestos and all this stuff, and I ended up calling some kind of extended stay place and getting her family a room there for several days. To have some due diligence, I made a copy of her driver's license. Then I think I drove her to the hotel, or I know I drove her somewhere. My boss and Judie must not have been around or that never would have happened. I wasn't afraid of her, though, because she was in terrible shape. She could barely walk.

I thought.

In the middle of the night, I woke up thinking about her sad story. Then, I remembered something about her newborn child, and I remembered that according to her driver's license, she was about 47 years old. And I thought, huh.

So the next morning, the copy of her license in hand, I called the place I normally called when people somehow got through Judie and into my office with their sad stories, an outreach center, and they knew the woman's name and several aliases and asked if she had taken me for a hotel room. She didn't have seven children or a husband. She had a really sad story, though.

I was horrified, and immediately replaced the money from my discretionary fund I had used. She called me again a couple weeks later, and this time, I said, “I called Norfolk Urban Outreach,” and her tone of voice completely changed and she couldn’t get off the phone fast enough.

Here at St. David’s, when people call for assistance, Dana and I don’t even try to screen. We refer everyone to CCHASM.

Then I hear this parable, and I worry that the woman with seven phantom children and the asbestos was Jesus.

This parable can also be read as one in which the world will be judged on how it treats the church. Some scholars have argued that “the least of these who are members of my family” refers specifically to Christians. They came to this conclusion looking at the particular words used and how Matthew uses them in other places in his Gospel.

Note that if this reading is valid, that’s not an excuse for us as Christians to go around feeling persecuted because others don’t celebrate Christmas the way we do. It’s not up to us to decide how the world is treating us as a church. Remember, the sheep and the goats were clueless. Instead, we could read this as a call for us not only to do good things, not simply to revel in benevolence and donate our time and money, but also to strive to *be* the least. Not to just do things for others, but to be with them. To be them. We are the church. We are *all* called to be ministers of the Gospel. If this way of looking at the parable is true, then we are called not only to serve the least, but to *be* the least. To sometimes be hungry. To sometimes be the stranger. To have some people help us, and others not.

On Christ the King Sunday, we are called not to see Jesus as a king with a jeweled crown on a golden throne. We are called to see him as someone vulnerable and in need of our help. We are called to protect and help. And, we are called to be vulnerable and let others help us. We are called to serve the least and to be the least.