Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said: 31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’  37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’  40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, 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 no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’  44 Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’  45 Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, 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.”
Reflection

As shared in the previous devotion, the three parables of Matthew 25—ten bridesmaids, talents, and sheep and goats—are the last parables Jesus taught in Matthew’s Gospel, and as such, are the capstone of Jesus’ teaching. Fittingly, they each deal with “last things,” that is, final judgment.

As the very last of the three final parables, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is perhaps more well-known and influential than any other parable in Matthew. This is true in the church, as well as outside of it. For instance, eight years ago, during the Democratic National Convention, then Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren drew attention to the New Testament passage as having increasing significance for the Democratic Party. “‘In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,’ ” she said, quoting Jesus. “The passage teaches about God in each of us,” she continued, “that we are bound to each other, and we are called to act — not to sit, not to wait — but to act, all of us together.”

Warren’s interpretation of this parable is the most common interpretation today, consistently in liberal Christian circles but increasingly often in evangelical lines, too: that Jesus’ story teaches that all the people of the world will be judged by their response to the poor; no matter who those poor are. In some circles, this text is taught almost as promoting “salvation by works,” the idea that we can earn our way into heaven by performing good deeds. This idea is often supported by Mother Teresa, who explained her many years of ministry in the slums of Calcutta by saying, “We see Jesus in the poor.”

Now, I don’t want for one minute to deny that Scripture teaches some kind of responsibility to the poor and downtrodden. The Parable of the Good Samaritan, which we studied a few weeks ago, clearly makes that point, as it offers a striking illustration of compassion for physical need across ethnic and religious boundaries. We might also point to James 1:27, which speaks of religion as epitomized by caring for orphans and widows, the most vulnerable in Jesus’ day, as well as keeping oneself unstained from the world. We also read in the New Testament texts, such as Galatians 6:10, that each us to do good to all people, but especially to those of the household of faith.

So we can understand why the Parable of the Sheep and Goats is read in a way that encourages believers’ care for the poor. But this interpretation, while the best known today, is not the only interpretation, nor is it the interpretation previous generations of Christians would be most familiar with. I’d like, therefore, to propose another interpretation and explain why I think it, beside being the interpretation the majority of Christians throughout history have adopted, is also the better, more faithful approach to take.

This alternative interpretation is founded on a close reading of the passage, and in particular the focus on the terms that Jesus uses to define the various characters in the passage. Let’s look first at how Jesus introduces the passage: when the Son of Man returns, he says, the nations will be gathered before the throne to hear the King’s verdict. The Greek word used here for “nations” is ethnoi, from which we get the English word, “ethnic.” It means, “nations” or “peoples,” but it was used by Jews for anyone who wasn’t Jewish, that is "the Gentiles." And this was carried over by Christians to refer to those who were not Christian, that is "unbelievers." So, before the
King are all the “nations,” that is, all those who are not Jewish or Christian. So already, we are tipped off to the fact that Jesus talking not so much about Christians, or even Jews, but everybody else, the different nations and peoples of the world that are not in a covenental relationship with God.

This identification of the “nations” with outsiders to the faith is reinforced by another of the terms that Jesus uses: “the least of these my brothers and sisters,” and “the least of these” in verses 40 and 45. Now, in most interpretations you hear of this passage, the reference to the “least” is taken to mean the least of the world—“the least, the last and the lost,” the marginalized and the downtrodden and those left out. And so the point is that whenever we have compassion on the poor, the homeless, the orphaned and the like, we are really serving Jesus. Yet “least” here is expressly attached to another word, “my brothers.” And everywhere else in Matthew’s gospel, when Jesus refers to his “brothers,” his “brethren,” he is talking about his disciples, those who hear his commands and obey. So when he says “the least of these my brothers,” in Matthew that means he is talking about Christians, particularly the least of us, the weakest, most vulnerable, the ones with the lowest status, who are persecuted and belittled and tortured.

Now, again, this is not to say that we Christians have no obligations to the poor and put down, only that those is not who Jesus is talking about here. He’s talking about his “brethren”, vulnerable Christians and those among the “nations” who have compassion on them. Those among the nations, he says, will be judged on the basis of how they treat Jesus’ weak “brothers and sisters.” That’s not at all how most preachers and pew-sitters understand this parable. But it does make a lot of sense in light of another, earlier passage in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 10:40-42, Jesus gives instructions to the Twelve as he sends them out on their first mission without him, to carry on his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. Jesus had commanded them to be dependent on the hospitality of the villagers in whose towns they ministered, even for such basis necessities as food, drink, money and clothing. Jesus then ends with:

“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Anyone who welcomes someone known to be a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who someone known to be righteous will receive a righteous person’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded.” (Matt 10:40-2)

Here Jesus is suggesting that he so closely identifies with his disciples, especially the least among them, that whatever kindness is shown to them—even a cup of water—is tantamount to kindness to Jesus himself. That close identification is paralleled in the parable before us: “‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” (v40)

So this passage isn’t so much about how we get right with God, but is an answer to age old question: What about those outside the church—the Hindus, Confusions, Mormons, atheists and Buddhists? What is going to happen to them on Judgment Day? Jesus’ answer is that it will depend on whether they showed compassion on believers—especially those missionaries who continued to follow Jesus' command to go out with no money and no possessions. Compassionate unbelievers will be given a place in the new world Jesus is establishing. And those who did not show compassion, Jesus says, would be called to account for their hardheartedness. You can imagine how this passage would have been comforting to the
persecuted Christians in Matthew’s day, assuring them that God will judge unbelievers for their treatment of Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

But doesn’t this still suggest a certain form of salvation by works, that unbelievers will be able to earn a place in God’s Kingdom through their good deeds if only those done to Christians? Not so! Their good deeds are not treated as atoning for their sins. Rather their compassion towards Jesus’ brothers and sisters is shown as indicating an implicit relationship with Jesus! Through him, through Christ, they have an inheritance in God’s kingdom. They inherit it, they don’t earn it. It’s a gift, not unlike the gift of baptism. Just as none of us earned our place among God’s people, and were given it free of charge, the same is true with unbelievers who show compassion, and are in fact surprised by gift. Conversely, the “goaty” people are condemned, not for their lack of virtue or on account of their especially appalling sinfulness, but specifically for rejecting Jesus’ family and thus their rejecting him and the salvation that he brings.

Ok, so where does this story leave us? I mean, the church is no longer a vulnerable minority. In fact it has wielded considerable power for centuries. Most of us are relatively secure and have ample means to provide for ourselves. To be sure, there are Christian brothers and sisters in places like Syria or Pakistan who are still today subject to discrimination and persecution, even death. This passage still speaks to their situation. But what does it say to us in ours?

While this parable may no longer be as reassuring to us, as we are no longer a persecuted minority, there is yet an even more profound lesson to be found in Jesus’ teaching here. Jesus asserts that treatment of the least among Jesus’ followers is tantamount to their treatment of Jesus himself. This can be understood because Christian missionaries are in a sense representatives of Christ. And it was understood in Jesus’ day, that receiving someone’s representative, showing them hospitality, was tantamount to receiving the person themselves. But, I think that Jesus is saying more than that here. It’s not just that the missionaries represent Jesus, in the sense that they act on Jesus’ behalf, but rather they—we—are representatives in the sense of re-presenting Jesus. We re-present Christ in that we make Christ present again, here and now. We provide what may be the only image of Jesus most people are ever going to see.

I don’t know about you, but that is a humbling thought. And to be honest I’m not entirely comfortable with it. We definitely have no reason to swagger or boast. Knowing that people’s response to us, even the least of us, could determine their ultimate destination—that’s a lot of power…and a lot of responsibility. And I can’t help but ask myself if what I am doing allows others to see Christ in me or if there are things that I do or say that obscure or distort the image of Christ. That Jesus trusts us his followers to represent him in this way is amazing, but also incredibly humbling!

So, contrary to the way we typically read this story, this story of the sheep and the goats is not really about us or about how we will find Jesus among the poor. Rather it is about how unbelievers may encounter Jesus in us, and have a relationship with him through us. We can try to get out of it, saying things like everyone goes to heaven, but God has seen fit that we have a part to play in sharing his kingdom with those around us. It’s a responsibility, yes, but also a privilege that God has given us to serve others. Thanks be to God!
Artistic Illumination

Surprisingly, Matthew 25’s separation of the "sheep" from the "goats" has not inspired many artists over the centuries. More often than not, that poetic image has been obscured and subsumed by the larger implication of the story—that of a final judgment of humanity. Accordingly, the following works include the few that picture the image of “sheep” and “goats,” as well as more numerous depictions of the Last Judgment.

Detail of sarcophagus lid with Christ separating the sheep from the goats. Roman, 3rd or 4th century. Here, Christ stands or sits between them, showing by his gestures which group is welcome and which is not.

Portrayal of the Last Judgment, 6th century mosaic in Ravenna, Italy
Medieval illuminators (Bible illustrators) are less anonymous and invisible than we might think. Some left both their names and images, often shown in prayer. From the 12th century onwards, a few depicted themselves at work. By the 1400s illuminators are shown surrounded by tools and pigments. The presence of associates, including women, reflects the collaborative and familial nature of manuscript production.

Here the apostles accompany the Son of Man in heaven, while, below, St. Michael welcomes the blessed to his right, and, on his left, the devil pitchforks the cursed into the monstrous hellmouth last seen on the first page of the book, prepared for the Rebel Angels.

David, The Last Judgement, c1230

Depictions of illuminators are rare, but the prolific artist William de Brailes, based in 13th-century Oxford, left at least three images of himself. Here he is shown in the lower right semi-circle, being saved on Judgement Day. St Michael lifts him away from the sinners who are condemned to eternity in Hell. William holds a scroll inscribed ‘W[illiam] de Braile[s] made me.’ It confirms his identity, advertises his authorship of the image and reveals the spiritual anxieties of a highly successful member of the professional book trade.

Here Christ sits enthroned above in a mandorla (almond-shape) attended by angels while below him the dead rise from their graves and are conducted either to Heaven or to Hell, which is pictured as a monstrous maw. One or more angels will be blowing trumpets.
Here in addition to Christ, there are twelve apostles who stretch across the centre of the painting, with six either side of Christ. The remaining figures are then symbolically divided into sections above and below, left and right, depending on the whichever judgment has been delivered. (Note the separation of the two groups follows the directions of Matthew 25) Further detail provides greater contrast on heaven and hell. Additionally, it is the archangels of Michael and Raphael who can be seen holding the cross just below Christ himself.
In this visually complex composition, Fra Angelico adapts traditional Last Judgment prototypes with new innovations. Christ sits elevated in the heavenly skies encircled by a mandorla and a host of angels; to his left and right are the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist who are flanked by rows of Saints. Below the heavenly scene, is a long row of opened tombs, signifying the dead to be judged. To the left of the tombs, one sees abundant vegetation, and angels blissfully dancing around the gateway to heaven and gazing towards the skies. Conversely, on the right the damned are forcibly dragged by devils to the depths of hell to incur various punishments. The depiction of angels dancing before the gates of heaven is unprecedented. This detail might come from part of a 15th-century hymn based on newly discovered patristic texts that describe how "a wheel is formed in heaven of all the saints in the garden...they all dance for love...they are dressed in particolors, white and red."
Stefan Lochner (German, 1410-51), *Last Judgment*, c. 1435, Cologne

The upper half of the panel is dominated by the three large forms of Jesus, Mary and St. John. Jesus is placed in the center of the upper half of the panel, sitting on a double rainbow which emits beams, with his hand held outwards. Mary and John kneel at either side of him in poses of prayer as they beg for salvation for the souls beneath. Jesus' right hand is raised in the act of blessing the dead who are to be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven (represented by a Gothic church), his left hand is lowered as he condemns the sinners to eternal punishment. His looks down toward the saved to his right. A large group of angels hover at either side of him. The lower half of the panel shows a large body of mortals and demons. The dead rise from their graves, to face judgment. As is traditional, the saved are accompanied by angels as they move towards (from the viewer's perspective) the left hand side of the picture. The damned, who occupy the lower half of the panel, are scuttled and tormented by demons towards the right hand side. In this work, the saved are finally greeted by St. Peter as they enter a heavenly city, while the lost are driven towards the blazing fires of hell. The faces and expressions of the damned are full of dread and physical pain. Some of the devils drag the condemned using a chain. The demons gnash their teeth.

Fernando Gallego and workshop (Spanish, 1440-1507), *The Last Judgment*, 1480-8
In this print of the Last Judgment, unusual in the use of the symbolism of Matthew 25, the angel Michael separates the sheep and goats, to their respective fates.
Hans Memling (German, 1430–1494), *Last Judgment*, c. late 1460s

Note the similarities to Lochner’s piece above (Fr example, the Kingdom of Heaven depicted as a Gothic church)
Ercole Ramazzini (Italian, 1530-98), *The Last Judgment*, 1517
Here we see (the first time in these pieces) hell dominated by a single demonic creature, Satan.

Raphael Coxie (Flemish, c1540–1616), *Last Judgment*, c1588
Fr. Luke Dingman, *Icon of the Last Judgment, contemporary*

An analysis of this icon can be found [here](#). Note the visual echo of Giotto’s Last Judgment (above) in the red stream that flows to hell/dragon’s mouth. Notice also the “great chasm” between heaven and hell, a reference from the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

*Icon of the Last Judgment, contemporary*
This is among the few contemporary portrayals of the Last Judgment (the subject is apparently no longer in fashion), with many of the traditional features, except that the heavenly realm is depicted as not only “above” but “behind,” in the background, suggesting perhaps that judgment is “behind” the present world.
Eugene Burnand (Swiss, 1850-1921), *Sheep and Goats*, 1908

In Burnand’s series of drawings on the parables, he chooses to depict not the judgment, as have the other artwork included here, but rather a woman visiting a sick man, one of the behaviors that characterize the “sheep” in the parable.

Contemporary Bible Illustration

Jesus separates the literal sheep and goats, similar Jode’s *Last Judgment* (above)
A modern American tapestry
Depicting various activities characteristic of the “sheep,” curiously they include Christian ministers, rather than the “nations”

Contemporary “Goat Nations”
Here, the artist depicts peoples of the earth—protestors, banner-wavers, soldiers—as the “goats” in Jesus’ story