

Loving Service

Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25:31-36

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Our loyalty to the reign of Christ is revealed through our acts of love and care.

A couple of weeks after I began seminary, I was assigned to do field education at a small Presbyterian church in a Philadelphia suburb. The interview was hardly rigorous: the pastor looked at me and asked if I would work with their middle school youth group. I said “yes,” and he said, “we’ll see you Sunday.” It didn’t matter to me. I felt as if I had been just nominated to be the chaplain of the United States Senate. The only rule, the pastor told me, is don’t let the kids talk you into playing “Sardines,” which is a sort of reverse hide and go seek game.

I showed my naivete by not asking a follow up question, and instead showed up the next week with a bind full of ideas for youth group conversations, Bible studies, and games— none of which involved playing “Sardines.” I later found out that the previous seminary student’s experience at the church had ended poorly following an intense round of “Sardines” that involved significant damage to the women’s restroom. So, when I told the kids we were going to start youth group by playing a game, they all cheered and said, “We love Sardines!”

They were less thrilled when I told them we weren’t playing “Sardines,” but were instead playing, “Barnyard Confusion.” Barnyard Confusion is an active icebreaker game that involves giving each player the name of a farm animal. The goal is to find others who are the same animal by making the noise your animal makes. And, just to make it fun, you turn off the lights and play in the dark.

What could possibly go wrong? We started playing and all was fine for about 10 seconds until I heard the sound of a tiny sixth grade boy screaming in pain, yelling, “He kicked me! He kicked me!” I flicked on the lights to find the boy curled up on the ground. Meanwhile, all the older boys looked at me with blank stares and shrugged.

That was what could go wrong. The boy was the smallest member of the youth group. He had been dropped off by his mother who had pushed him into the church and then turned

to keep moving, almost as if she were saying, “Well, good luck...he’s yours now!” She looked exhausted and exasperated.

The boy became my challenge. Probably the best thing which could have been said about the kid was that he was awkward, but most of the time he was truly annoying. While I didn’t approve of him getting kicked, I quickly figured out why he had been kicked. I was grateful that Jesus loved him, because frankly most everyone else was having a hard time. My wife tells me this is why human species rarely pick out their mates in middle school. I don’t remember his name, but I do remember he was a handful.

But the arc of time also gives you insight. I now understand he was not a problem child; he was among the great cloud of witnesses Jesus describes as “the least of these.”

Jesus’ depiction of the last judgment is its own kind of Barnyard confusion. There are only sheep and goats, which is just fine, because they, too, are a handful. My sister-in-law, Carol’s twin sister, has raised goats for many years, and I can tell you there’s little difference between an ornery sixth grade boy and a goat, including the smell. Goats are stubborn and opinionated and recalcitrant and rarely do the things you want them to do. Just ask my wife about the afternoon she spent trying to get a goat to get into the back of a truck.

Matthew’s version of Barnyard Confusion ends as the shepherd divides the herd. The sheep are rewarded for their faithfulness while the goats are sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil. It’s nothing personal, it’s just business.

If this sort of judgment scene makes your skin crawl, then you are in good company. The most common reason why young adults under age 30 say they have stopped attending church is their feeling that churches are judgmental and exclusive. But this story is not told to create waves of fear or to wag fingers at others. Jesus is not motivating the disciples by fear. Instead, he is prompting us to greater faithfulness. Fear is paralyzing, but the Spirit is liberating.

Fear is used to command and control, but love creates relationship and trust. Love dares to see those Jesus names as the “least of these” while fear pushes them away. And in this game of barnyard confusion, love is what counts, and the least of these are who matters most. Yet the least of these are the people who often overlook.

You don’t need to go very far. We may think that homelessness is an issue only in the city, but take a drive down Manchester road. If you look carefully behind the stores, you’ll see

tents where homeless have gathered. A cheap apartment in West County costs more than \$1,300 a month, so it should be no surprise that the least of these are struggling.

You do not need to go very far to see the hungry, the thirsty, the ill, the lonely, or imprisoned. They are all around us. They are children rejected by families because they are gay. They are working moms struggling to pay for daycare and formula. They are the exhausted families of mentally ill persons, or parents of special needs children.

And, in a surprising twist, some scholars suggest that when Jesus refers to least of these, he is referring to those who are the faithful in Christ who show up for worship and live their faith daily. It is the least of these who are Christians, not necessarily the wise sheep. The followers of Christ have become the least of these by rejecting paths of power in favor of service and love.

So here is Jesus' final lesson to the disciples. He describes a wild, apocalyptic scene unlike anything else the gospels describe. It is a truly a scene of barnyard confusion, a reminder of what it means to be salt and light in the world.

And before you ask, yes, this will be on the test. But even more importantly, this will be the test of what it means to follow Christ.

In her book *Rehearsing Scripture*, Anna Carter Florence poses a series of questions for churches interested in creating communities around the reading and speaking of scripture. She offers six questions, but let's start with the first.

The first question she asks is, "What's the place in the text that fascinates you, bothers you, troubles you, thrills you, haunts you, angers you, gladdens you, or otherwise jumps up to meet you?" In other words, what's the place in the scripture you have read that gets you?"¹

Perhaps it is the way the sheep are rewarded for having dedicated themselves to what matters most: providing food, drink, hospitality, and compassion to Christ. It is these actions which define faith. Day in and day out, they serve others, seeing all people as bearing the image of God. No one recruited them to help with a mission project, none of them had signed up to go on a mission trip. They have lived their faith as an expression of deep gratitude.

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture*, p. 86.

But what also sticks with me is that neither group are judged by the content of what they believe. No one is asked to write a statement of faith. No one is quizzed on the particulars of theology. Indeed, we ask more questions of candidates for ministry than Jesus asks of those who follow him! No one is judged according to the orthodoxy of faith, but on their desire make the ideal of faith a reality.

This is what sticks with me, and I believe it is our good news. The sheep never saw their efforts as anything special. It is just what they did every day. They have spent their lives with the “least of these,” the squirrely sixth grader, the hungry child, the old and infirm, and those who have no way of speaking up for themselves. ``

Tom Long, in his commentary on Matthew, writes: “This dramatic disclosure, that Jesus Christ is present in the world in “the least of these who are members of my family” is the focal point of this parable. The world will be judged according to whether it did or did not show hospitality to Jesus Christ, the Messiah clothed not in royal majesty but coming to the world hidden among the “least of these.”²

This is what participating in the kingdom means. On busy streets filled with holiday shoppers, it means driving with kindness and compassion. In stores staffed by overworked clerks, it means remaining patient and praying for their families as you wait. In packed restaurants it means caring for those who serve us. On borders, in food pantries, in hospital wards and prison cell blocks, it means looking with compassion into the faces of Christ. Amen.

² Thomas G. Long, [Matthew](#), ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 285.