

Jesus as the Least of These

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Psalm 138; Luke 5:1-11

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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February 27, 2022 – Transfiguration Sunday

As we are concluding our three-week deep dive into Matthew 25, exploring the implications of this astonishing text, and joining with our denomination's commitment – as a predominantly white denomination – to identify and dismantle racism, in its individual manifestations, but also in its structural, corporate, and societal expressions and impacts, we come to the third group of persons in the parable. In weeks one and two, Layne and Jen, in their remarkable sermons, have helped us to reflect on Jesus' words to the sheep and to the goats. Until very recently, if you had asked me, I would have told you that those were all of the people in Matthew 25. It was a parable about two groups of people – there were the sheep, and there were the goats. But as Layne, Jen, and I were talking about this text, this essential text for understanding who Jesus is and where Jesus is to be found, one of them – and I can't remember who it was – observed that there is quite clearly a 3rd group in the text. And that's the "least of these."

As soon as this observation was made, it hit me like a ton of bricks that I had done a very goat-like thing, which was to completely overlook the least of these in my anxiety about whether I am a sheep or a goat. Just as the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner, the sick, and the stranger are routinely ignored in our society, to the point that we design highway systems to go around the parts of town where they live, and where we remove them from our city-centers, I had ignored them in the text, except as instruments that affect the judgment of the sheep and the goats.

One of the driving questions that this text asks of us, and this text asks it more directly than almost any other text that I know of, is who are the least of these for you? Because the way that we answer that question will answer another question for us, which is who is Jesus for you? A core claim of this text is that our Lord Jesus Christ, him whom we claim as Lord of all and Head of the church, him whom this parable identifies as the Son of Man in his glory and as the king, he is to be found among those who are in pain in our society and in our world. And not only is he to be found *among* them, but he is also to be found as one of them.

This is an absolutely remarkable claim that should shake us to the root of our souls. The Messiah, God's Agent in whom the kingdom of God draws near, identifies with the least and the last and the lost in our world. If we want to find him, we need to move towards them. If we want to be close to him, we need to be close to them. When we meet one of them, we are meeting him, and when we ignore or avoid or shun or mistreat one of them, we are ignoring, avoiding, shunning, and mistreating him.

Exodus 2:23-25, the first text that Cathy read for us, makes an already very strong claim that God in heaven hears the cries of enslaved, abused people, and when God hears their cries, God moves into action. Exodus 2 wants us to know, in no uncertain terms, that God is attentive to the cries of the least of these. Matthew 25 sees this claim of Exodus 2 and raises it considerably to say that Jesus Christ identifies with the least of these.

What this text wants us to see is that our Lord Jesus is to be found wherever people are in pain. Their pain is his pain. We may therefore know that the pain of Ukrainians who are experiencing the ruthless anxiety and greed of Vladimir Putin is the pain of Jesus. Their pain is his pain. The pain of Muslim Uyghurs in China, who are suffering under the abusive and controlling narrowness of the Chinese government, is the pain of Jesus. Human pain is Jesus' pain. Our pain is his pain, and the way that we respond to human need and human pain is the way that we respond to Jesus.

In our US context, with our long history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, this also means attending to issues of race, both historical and contemporary. Now, everything cannot be reduced to issues of race, and Matthew 25 cannot be reduced to only being about race, but in the US context race is a core aspect of social pain that we must not ignore. This understanding has hit home for me in two key ways. One was during the Clergy United for Racial Empathy, or CURE, trip a couple of years ago, about which I have told you so much, in which I was with clergy from northern Virginia for several days, traveling around our state. On that trip, among colleagues who were quickly becoming friends, I became increasingly, and embarrassingly, aware of how beliefs about white superiority were living deep inside of me. On that trip, we talked together about the persistence of the wealth gap between white families and families of color in our country, where the wealth of the average white family is 5-7 times larger than the wealth of the average Black family, which means that, on average, times of economic disruption are going to affect white families less severely.¹ We talked about the incarceration gap in our country, where in 2010, white people, who made up 64% of the overall population, constituted 39% of the incarcerated population; while Black people who made up only 13% of the population, constituted 40% of the incarcerated population.² I had thought that I was pretty alert to these things, but as we traveled around the state, having conversations and visiting historical sites of racial violence in Virginia, I realized that I've got a lot of learning and a lot of unlearning to do, and that my own healing as a person of faith, and a disciple of Jesus, depends on it.

The second thing was when the Korean-American author Soong Chan Rah introduced me, in one of his books, to Revelation 7:9. As a mainstream Presbyterian, I have to confess to an embarrassing level of unfamiliarity with the book of Revelation. Dr. Rah called my attention to Revelation 7:9, where the author has a vision of heaven, in which "there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and

¹ Aliprantis, Dionissi; Carroll, Daniel R. (28 February 2019). *"What Is Behind the Persistence of the Racial Wealth Gap?"*. *Economic Commentary* (2019-03): 1-6. doi:10.26509/frbc-ec-201903.

² <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/rates.html>

languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” Revelation 7:9 announces, for all to see, that the kingdom of heaven is a brilliantly multi-national, multi-cultural fellowship. And then, when I looked at the Presbyterian Church USA and at the congregations with which I have been connected over my life, I realize that our churches do not reflect that same multi-cultural brilliance and richness. Here at Lewinsville, Roy Mitchell has been trying to call our attention for a number of years to the fact that the racial-ethnic composition of our congregation does not reflect the racial-ethnic diversity of Fairfax County. Our own healing as a congregation will be deepened as we move in a multi-cultural direction, and we should expect that this will open up and even challenge some of our assumptions, habits, prejudices, and expectations. As we come into deeper relationship with people who are different from ourselves, we may find ourselves thinking differently about a whole variety of issues – from styles of music to kinds of food, to ways of gathering in worship, to what we do with our money and how we spend our leisure time. The holy promise in this is that we will increasingly have the opportunity to hear God’s voice in those who are different from us. Pluralism is a heavenly gift to be received, not a threat to be feared.

Revelation 7:9 is a picture of the beloved community, and you and I are called to be part of building that here in our community. What Matthew 25 wants us to see is that attending to human pain – wherever we find it – noticing it, moving towards it, staying with it even when it makes us uncomfortable, even when it starts to tickle our self-interest so that we want to run away from it, attending to human hurt is a central part of building the beloved community. That’s because our Lord Jesus is to be found among the least of these. Centering human pain - acknowledging our own pain and being present and available to the pain of others - that’s the secret sauce behind building the beloved community. It will soften us, it will open us, it will bring us to tears, and it will yield good fruit for the kingdom. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.