

“Undercover God”
Matthew 25:31-46
First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn
The Rev. Frederick Woodward November 20, 2011

Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Undercover God

Once in while someone at our home flips on the television and the show “Undercover Boss” comes on. Maybe some of you have seen it. The show has a fascinating premise. A CEO or high-level executive of a company grows a stubble of a beard- the CEO in the few shows I have seen has been a man- and gets an entry-level job in one of the branches, franchises or stores in his company. He receives on-the-job training and, in the process, gets ample opportunity to eat humble pie. He learns what his employees really deal with every day, and which business practices seem to be working and which could work a lot better. He also hears the employees’ stories about the challenges they face not only in their workplaces, but also in their homes, everything from raising sick children to caring for elderly parents.

Toward the end of the show, the undercover boss invites the employees with whom he closely worked back to the company's headquarters. By that time, the undercover boss has become for them a distant memory. The employees have little idea who is really summoning them or why. Once they have all begun to settle in his conference room and the air has become thick with excitement, the undercover boss strides in and greets them. They fail to recognize him, of course, because now he is clean-shaven, wears a suit, and welcomes them in a totally different environment.

As the undercover boss begins to connect the dots for his sheepish guests, they gasp in shock and amazement. The undercover boss proceeds to tell them what he observed when he was in their midst. The employees heave a sigh of relief as they realize that they are not in any trouble, but are being recognized instead for their distinctive contributions to their company.

And then in a scene that is sure to bring tears to everyone's eyes, the undercover boss who has given up his cover rewards each of the employees not only in their professional lives, but also in their personal ones. To one he might offer a college scholarship, to another a well-deserved vacation, and to still another financial assistance to help raise an ailing child or care for an aging parent.

I am always a little nervous when the show first comes on that the undercover boss will encounter a really nasty or dishonest employee, but that never seems to happen. The employees on the few shows I have seen invariably take pride both in themselves and in their work. At times, the show is so upbeat and sunny that it starts to feel like an infomercial for the company, and when that happens, I start to lose interest.

In a recent bout of boredom, it occurred to me that the show that could really hold my attention would not be Undercover Boss, but Undercover God. And so I began to work out that show's premise in my head. God comes back to the world incognito, and observes us at close hand, how we are living out our calling as Christ's disciples and as his church. As I began to imagine all the different life arenas in which our God might come back to us in disguise, it hit me- I am a little slow sometimes- that my show concept had already been taken almost two thousand years ago.

For according to Matthew, our God is already an undercover God who regularly comes to us incognito in Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus shall come again at the end of the age, but in the meantime, according to Matthew at least, Jesus is coming back all the time. He comes back undercover in the hungry person, the thirsty person, the stranger, the person who lacks adequate clothing, the sick person, the prisoner, in short, he comes back in all those whom Jesus describes as "the least of these."

So today I would like to share with you seven brief observations about our morning's important Bible lesson. And to give you an idea just how important this passage is for our faith and life, remember that it is the only New Testament narrative that depicts the last judgment with any specific detail.

My first observation is that what gives this judgment narrative real bite is that it expresses judgment not only against outsiders,¹ but also, and most pointedly, against insiders, people like us in fact, people in the church who claim to know Jesus.² That should really make us listen up, for like it or not, this narrative seems to have been specially crafted to undermine any easy confidence on our part that we are the good people of this world whose salvation is alone certain.

A second and related observation is that the outcome of the king's judgment comes as much a surprise to the sheep as it does to the goats. Neither the sheep nor the goats recognized Jesus when he came incognito, and both were equally taken aback at the final judgment. Given our story's logic, who among us could possibly boast that we alone are in a position to reliably recognize Jesus whenever he comes to us undercover?

The very logic of the story precludes such boasting since it was not only the goats, but also the sheep who failed to recognize Jesus when he came among them in persons who were hungry, thirsty, or homeless, or in persons who were strangers or sick or in prisoner. In this shocking ending, any presumption or arrogance on our part as regards our final standing before God is summarily stripped away.

Third, the narrative suggests that it is not our doctrinal beliefs, our piety, our worship, or even our acceptance of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior that will most be at issue at the last judgment, but instead, the character of our lives, and indeed, the character of our mercy. What we say we believe matters, but our biblical narrative this morning suggests that it is how we act out our beliefs that is crucial. Should the king discover a disconnect between our beliefs and our practice, between the faith we profess and the way we flesh that faith out concretely in the world in our actions toward others, we will be grave risk of forfeiting our salvation.

Fourth, we aren't told what makes the sheep sheep, except that they tend to the needs of all the nobodies whom God created to be somebodies. The sheep don't seem to care at all about all the distinctions we tend to care so very much about. For example, the narrative makes no distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. It does not pause to ask whether or not the strangers or aliens to whom we owe the duty of care are in the land legally, or whether the prisoners we visit or fail to visit have been justly or unjustly convicted. When it comes to the unloved and the unlovable, all the sheep seem to care about is the caring itself.

Fifth, and in a similar vein, we aren't told what made the goats goats, except that they didn't seem to care about caring the way the sheep did. Maybe they failed to express mercy to the undercover Jesus because they were too busy. Maybe they were caught up in their own fear, whether of being inconvenienced, being taken advantage of, or being hurt.

For all we know, the goats may even have helped some people along the way when they believed it was in their best interest to do so, or when they thought that

¹ That the narrative functions universally as a judgment not only of insiders but also of outsiders is indicated in its opening lines. Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man who will sit on his throne in glory, and before whom "All the nations (*panta ta ethne*) will be gathered" (Matt. 25:32).

² That the narrative functions as a judgment of insiders as well as outsiders is indicated by its literary context. The setting for this pericope (and the entire eschatological discourse) is the Mount of Olives, where "the disciples came to him privately" (Matt. 24:3). And in fact, Matthew 25:31-46 follows a series of three warnings about the unfaithfulness of insiders [the story of the faithful and wicked servants (Matt. 24:45-51; the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13); and the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30)].

somebody was watching. All we really know from the narrative is that the goats failed to act when Jesus visited them incognito. In contrast, the sheep did act, and acted sacrificially, though without any awareness that they were actually ministering to Jesus.

Sixth, neither the sheep nor the goats set out to be righteous. The sheep didn't minister to the downtrodden in the expectation that they really were ministering to Jesus in disguise. They simply lived out of the love and mercy of God, whereas the goats did not.

Seventh, and in conclusion, there is unexpected good news in this narrative for all of us who live in these in-between times, between Jesus' coming as a vulnerable child and his coming again to judge the world in righteousness and mercy. And that good news is that although we rarely recognize him, Jesus is in our midst daily.

It is not only that Jesus shall come again at the end of the age to condemn evil and make all things new, which is our future hope and confidence. It is not only that Jesus is made present to us even now through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is our present consolation and assurance. The good news is also that Jesus turns up again and again in places where we least expect to find him. That means that in our encounters with those people with whom we generally want nothing to do we shall discover opportunity upon opportunity to come face to face with our risen Lord.

Even if we fail to recognize him when he shows up, Jesus is around every corner. We may catch a glimpse of him in the neighbors we have not yet acknowledged to be our neighbors at all. We may enter into his special company when we dare to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And so my concluding counsel to you this morning is that you look for Jesus in every human face. Look for Jesus among the needy, the vulnerable and the weak. Look for Jesus in the faces of our little children in diapers, and in the faces of our older adults in nursing homes. Look for Jesus on street corners where foreign day laborers cue up in search of work. Look for Jesus among our homeless. Look for Jesus even in the faces of our prisoners on death row.

But let's not pretend that we can figure it all out in advance, because our narrative this morning suggests that our best calculations will invariably come up short. For when Jesus goes deep undercover, none of us can pretend to pick him out of the crowd.

So let us be about the work of showing mercy. Let us compassionately identify ourselves with the least among us, and let us leave it up to God to separate the sheep from the goats.

To God be the glory!