

Do It to the Least

Psalm 100
Matthew 25:31-46

On our living room wall hangs a beautiful original work of art. Melinda, a friend of ours with whom we worked one summer at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian conference center in northern New Mexico, created it. It consists of a 12"x17" canvas stretched over a simple wooden frame. On the canvas Melinda painted a scene familiar to all Ranch visitors: Chimney Rock, a formation that looms over the painter Georgia O'Keefe's old house. Melinda really captured the gorgeous colors, the pinks, beiges, reds and oranges of the bands of the bare rock mesas. Over the top of that painting, Melinda cross-stitched the words of Psalm 100. Given to us as a wedding present, I am quite sure we will keep it on display the rest of our lives.

The Psalms have long inspired works of art, whether of painting, prose, poetry, music, or other forms. Psalm 100:2: "Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God's presence with singing." Some few of you may have been told by an elementary music teacher that you just couldn't sing. I have even heard of students being told to mouth the words at concerts so they would not ruin the sound for everybody else. What a shame. I believe every singer's voice is music to God's ears. As we used to say in my previous church, "If you can't sing good and loud, just sing loud."

Psalm 100:3 tells us God created us. We belong to God. Verse 5 tells God has “steadfast love” for us. The Hebrew term translated here means eternal and unconditional love. God will *never* not love us. A.A. Milne wrote the wonderful Winnie the Pooh series of books. Notice I did not call them *children's* books, as I find I enjoy them at least as much as my grandchildren do as I read to them. In the first book the character Piglet asks, “‘We'll be friends forever, won't we, Pooh?’ ‘Even longer,’ Pooh answered.” Eternal and unconditional love is God's gift to us. No wonder artists of all stripes have gotten inspiration from the Psalms!

Our New Testament passage for this morning offers a very different kind of inspiration. It comes from what I have called perhaps the most troubling chapter in all the Gospels: Matthew 25. The climax of the chapter is Jesus' extended parable of the sheep and the goats. It opens with, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, then he will sit on his throne of glory.” With the circumlocution “Son of Man” Jesus refers to himself. “When *I* return to this earth,” he is saying, “*I* will sit on my judgment seat.” Though a son of a human mother, the Son of Man, he retains his full identity as God, and his right to pass judgment on other human beings. “All the nations will be gathered before (me)...and (I) will put the sheep at (my) right hand and the goats at (my left).” Every person listening to Jesus speak those words that day would immediately have understood their meaning. Sheep are docile, obedient, easy to shepherd. They get sent to the right hand of God, the place of favor and blessing. Goats are devious and contrary. They get sent to the left hand of God, the place of condemnation. As I lefty, I have never liked this but that is just the imagery used.

Many good stories have plot twists, little surprises inserted to entertain their audiences, but also to carry the plots to their ultimate—if unforeseen—conclusions. So it is with this parable. Jesus tells the sheep on his right hand they have fed, watered, welcomed, clothed, nursed and visited him in prison. They ask, “When did we do (all those things) for you?” And here comes the plot twist. He, mind you still telling the parable, says, “And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'” And of course then the obverse sequence of events concludes the parable. The “king” tells the goats that when they failed to do all these things for “the least of these” they failed to do it for the king, for Jesus. And therein lies the deeply troubling aspect of this parable. A very few listening to these words belong to the least. Maybe two people in this room (I speculated Friday morning as I wrote this sermon). A few more come close to belonging to the least but reside a rung or two up the ladder. The rest of us are either sheep or goats.

Here is a good place to stipulate that I do not absolve myself in the least from this dilemma. Indeed, the late misfortunes in my family have resulted in the certainty that Linda and I will receive some money. What will we do with it? Well, get new kitchen cabinets. But sources close to me have also insisted that we give some of it away. Dang. I hate it when she thinks for herself and believes God's words about the least! To rephrase Dana Carvey's storied Saturday Night Live character, the Church Lady (!), how *inconvenient*! Yet I make a public confession here and now that Linda has come closer to becoming a sheep, whereas I stubbornly keep being a goat.

Back to our story. Several of you have asked why I have not spoken from this pulpit about the Israeli-Gazan war. I have a simple answer. While I have followed it reasonably closely I cannot find a good guy to extol. Neither side in this dystopian story embodies biblical, God-based love. The whole sordid, thousands of years-old hatred and conflict between these peoples provides the world with nothing positive. Quite the contrary, if we wanted to turn our stomachs only a few minutes of an internet search would yield plenty of incidents perpetrated on both sides. Hamas started this episode. It looks like Israel will finish it. Meanwhile, babies, children and elderly people live in terror. It has dawned on me finally that this is the approach I feel called to take to the whole tragedy. There are more than enough “least of these” to go around in the Middle East. Atrocities committed in the sneak attack against vulnerable civilians living in the kibbutzim, the farming communal outposts at the outer edges of Israel. Many times more women and children killed in air bombings of Gaza City. The people in charge made these decisions and implemented them.

And the least of these, as usual, pay the heaviest price. Most if not all of the top players in Hamas live nowhere near Gaza. They are using the money given them by Iran, China and Russia to enjoy the high life in places like Qatar. Most Israelis, while grieving and under daily missile attack, do live under the protection of the most sophisticated, high-tech defense systems known to exist. The least of these are the ones suffering. But what can we do about it? How can we minister, as it were, to Jesus by ministering to them? We can make financial donations to the Red Cross and/or Red Crescent. We can let our political servants know we do not support

endless arming and funding of belligerents. We can pray for their safety. Short of picking up a rifle and trying to enter either Israel or Gaza to fight for whichever side we believe stands in the right, there is not much more we can do.

But what about the least of these who surround us? How can we minister to Jesus by ministering to them? What about the adults riding bikes around downtown because they lost their drivers' licenses through substance abuse or repeat offenses? What about the impoverished children who populate our schools? What about the lonely elderly playing out the string of their lives in homes we would never inhabit? They are legion. All of them. And in Matthew 25 God calls us to care for them. We have declared ourselves a “Matthew 25 church”, meaning that we hope to work to reduce systemic racism and generational poverty, and to promote congregational vitality. But we have struggled to discern just exactly how to tackle these immense problems. Perhaps I might suggest a couple of possibilities.

First, combating generational poverty. This is a complex and deep-rooted issue. Thousands of Vigo County residents live in poverty and do not believe it will ever change for them. They tend to live for today, to seek entertainment in the short-term rather than delay gratification in order to get educated and employed. If you believed the whole system was rigged against you—as they do—would you live any differently? To my knowledge we have four members of Central Presbyterian Church currently mentoring students at Ben Franklin Elementary. *But I cannot think of a more impactful thing we could possibly do.* I know that many of us have work and family schedules

that prohibit us from taking on this one hour per week work, but please consider trying it. Principal Tina Horrall tells me she will take anybody who passes the background check. The need is great. I have entered my third year of visiting with one particular student. We are finally connecting. He's always liked me but never trusted me. We seem to be getting to trust. He's telling me much more about his life. He's asking for help with math, which I thought would *never* happen. I have been saying that it has looked to me like he has no shot at life. I am beginning to see a light at the end of his tunnel, and it is not the headlamp of the locomotive of poverty. If you hear this calling to work individually with a student, please speak to me and I will get you connected.

The second idea I would propose lies at the intersection of poverty and our strategic planning process. We will never buy everybody's way out of poverty. If that were possible the trillions our nation has spent on the problem would have solved it already. But we can address certain root causes—especially in the promising area of education, with all the educators we have in this congregation—and make a dent in the local experience of poverty. According to the US Census Bureau, Vigo County is the fourth-most impoverished county in the state. Nearly 20% of our residents live below the poverty line. Maybe, just maybe, we can create some kind of initiative to get ahead of those numbers. This would not bring people into our church but it would certainly improve our congregational vitality as we see our work ministering to the least of these. They do indeed surround us, as do the arms of God. Do we want to be sheep, not goats? These and other ideas are how.