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Matthew 25:31-46

### Nothing, Something, Everything: The Gospel in Wonder Woman

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" <sup>40</sup>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." <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

I had a friend some years ago, an older gentleman, who would answer the question "How are you?" with "Better than I deserve." It always made me chuckle, wondering what kind of trouble he was getting into that he somehow escaped unscathed. I would also flash back to Reformed Theology class with George Stroup at Columbia Seminary and the idea of unmerited grace. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," Paul reminds us in Romans, and our Brief Statement of Faith bluntly agrees: "We deserve God's condemnation." The redemption Christ offers us is better than we deserve.

I was amused to hear my friend's greeting echoed in the recent *Wonder Woman* movie, in a toast that three good-hearted scoundrels share with one another:

Charlie: May we get what we want...

Steve Trevor: ...and may we get what we need.

Sameer: *But may we never get what we deserve.*

What do we deserve?

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Wonder Woman, or Diana as she's known in the film, is raised by a tribe of Amazons on the island of Themyscira, and their mission is to fight on behalf of humanity. Specifically, the Amazons believe that Ares, the god of war, has ensnared humankind in endless conflict, and once Ares is defeated, an era of peace will reign. Diana takes on this mission after meeting Steve Trevor, an American soldier who's been spying on the Germans on behalf of the British in World War I. It's "the war to end all wars," Trevor tells Diana, and that's all the invitation brave Diana needs to leave Themyscira and take on Ares—and thus, to defeat war itself.

Late into the movie, a character tries to convince Diana that humanity is not worth her heroism—they are savages, prone to tear one another apart, with or without Ares. They are getting what's coming to them, the character says; leave them to their self-imposed suffering and don't be sullied by their sins. Diana's own mother says as much to her: "They don't deserve you."

Is that true? Do we deserve to be left alone in our suffering, forced to find our way without any higher sense of guidance or hope?

In my more cynical moments, and steeped in the news of the day, I can't disagree. I look at each new atrocity we commit against one another—the erosion of kindness, our contempt for the natural creation, the -isms that stubbornly cling to us despite the fact that we should really know better by now—and I think, "Jesus died for this?!" Surely there's some other two-bit planet in the universe that needs redeeming, and yet is slightly more worthy of the gift than we numbskull earthlings.

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In today's scripture, we're told that there will be a grand sorting in the kingdom of God. Some, like sheep, will be gathered to Jesus' right hand, having succeeded to feed the hungry and visit the stranger. Others, the goats, will be on his left hand, punished for having failed to feed, clothe and visit.

So... the question inevitably hangs in the air at this point...  
Which are we? Sheep or goats?

Well, let's find out. Should be simple enough. I'd like you to raise your hand if you've ever given food to a hungry person, or offered clothing to someone who had little, or if you've visited a stranger or someone who was sick, or given water to a thirsty person.

*Impressive show of hands.*

Now I'd like to ask you to raise your hand if you've ever **failed** to give food to a hungry person, or failed to offer clothing to someone who had little, or failed to visit the stranger or the sick, or not given water to a thirsty person.

So many hands! Well, this complicates things. And if I'm honest, I've been in the second category way more often than the first.

We don't deserve saving... and yet the gift is given nonetheless.

Diana feels a sense of responsibility to protect humanity—it's her reason for being, the pivotal moment she's been training for her whole life. "Who would I be if I stay [on Themyscira]?" she asks her mother. For Diana, whether the world "deserves" her is irrelevant. She loves the world, and has the power to intervene on its behalf, and so she will. (Sound like someone we know?)

At a pivotal moment in the movie, Diana takes a stand against this business of deserving. She says, "It's not about what you deserve. It's about what you believe. And I believe in love."

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Gerard Hughes writes a little piece about God, comparing him to a character Hughes calls Good Old Uncle George. I wonder if he is a familiar character to some of you.

Good Old Uncle George is the relative that our parents takes us to visit, who they describe as very loving and very powerful. And when we come to visit, he tells us how happy he is to see us, and then says, "Now I want you to visit me every week, and let me show you what will happen if you don't." And he takes us down to his basement, where we hear the most awful screams and feel the heat of his fiery furnace, and we see the torment on the people's faces. And then we head home clutching our mother and father's hand, and they say, "Oh, don't you just love Uncle George with all your heart and soul, mind and strength?" And the truth is that we detest the man, but we know we can't say that. And from a young age a strange "religious schizophrenia" sets in. We know we are supposed to love him, but in reality, we are terrified and repulsed by this man. (paraphrased from *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God* by Dennis, Matthew and Sheila Linn)

If you have a view of God that looks like Good Old Uncle George, you're going to read this text as a warning of what will happen if you stray just a little bit from the right path.

But if your view of God is different—if you believe that it's not about what you deserve, but what you believe, and if you believe in the power of love—you're going to read this text differently.

Maybe Jesus preaches a strong word about sheep and goats, NOT because he's Good Old Uncle George trying to smite us the minute we slip up.

Maybe he preaches sheep and goats because he cares so much about this world that he really, *really* wants us to know: ***You are always called to be sheep. You are always called upon to feed and clothe and comfort and visit. That is never not your job. That task is going to be yours for as long as you draw breath.***

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Several years ago, I was preparing to preach for Easter, and I had two stories I wanted to tell, and couldn't decide which one to go with. Both helped flesh out the Easter message, that new life we yearn for, the new life that's promised in the resurrection. One story was modest and small in scope. It was an ordinary tale of kindness, neighbor to neighbor. The other story was grand and sweeping, a dramatic tale of daring sacrifice and transformation. I became curious—what do people want to hear? The relatable tale, that feels like something we can relate to, or the dramatic story that can inspire us to risk greatly? I took an informal poll, and found that—of all the luck!—people were equally divided on what kind of stories resonate with us.

I saw a similar tension play out in the story of Wonder Woman. When Diana first meets Steve Trevor, he explains why he is fighting in the war: “My father told me once, he said, ‘If you see something wrong happening in the world, you can either do nothing, or you can do something.’ And I already tried nothing.”

And so for a lot of the movie. Diana is kind of tagging along, as the various characters put these little plans in place to try to do their own small part, to do *something* to try to help end the conflict. They come to a place along No Man's Land in an entire town is suffering and held captive. Diana desperately wants to help this little town, but the other characters, armed with their “something,” tell her no. *We need to keep going. Let's just do our small part. Let's stay focused on our own contribution. We can't save everyone.*

And Diana says No: *I'm tired of doing Something. I'm tired of playing small. It's time to do everything. All of the things! It's time to give everything I have to the people who need me right here, right now.*

And she steps out of that trench and steps into her own power. She becomes who she was created to be—she becomes Wonder Woman.

And later in the movie, the man who was content just to do something, ends up making a profound sacrifice. Because she gave everything she had, he was inspired to give everything he had.

And so, are we called to the small faithful gesture, or the bold sacrifice of faith? It has to be both. We live in the space, the “no man's land,” between Something, and Everything... knowing we can only do what we can do, but knowing there will be times when we're called to sacrifice everything we can possibly give.

Jesus sets a high bar in this text. Everyone we feed, or fail to feed, or clothe, or fail to clothe, or visit, or ignore, is Christ himself. And that is the challenge of our faith. But the one who judges us was also himself judged, found guilty, and suffered the depths of human pain. He was arrested in prison—sick from being beaten—and nobody came to visit him. He was thirsty on that cross and they didn't give him water, they gave him sour wine. He was naked, and they did not clothe him, in fact they divided up his clothes to keep for themselves. He was a stranger to them.

But his story transcends all of that. His resurrection doesn't just change some of the things. It changes everything. We need not fear death and darkness and deserved judgment, because they are not the whole story.

The whole story is love and life and transformation and hope.  
It's a story we know well, and one we can never fully know, but we glimpse just enough of it to feed and clothe and quench and visit and heal another day.  
The story lives in the words of preacher William Sloane Coffin, who used to bless his congregations at the end of worship with these words:

May God give you grace never to sell yourself short.  
Grace to risk something big for something good.  
And grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth,  
And too small for anything but love.

(Diana would approve!)