

Sermon, Reign of Christ, Year A, November 22, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 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.’ (Matthew 25:37-40)

Today’s well-known Gospel passage from Matthew is Jesus’ final address to his disciples before being handed over to be crucified. These words are what Jesus wants them most to know and remember. Jesus has sometimes endearingly spoken of the “little ones” or the “least of these.” Clearly Jesus identifies with the vulnerable, those who are described in Scripture as requiring special care such as children, the poor, the sick, and the widowed. He also refers to his disciples as “little ones.” Here, Jesus goes a step further, saying: “...Just as you did it to one of the least of these *who are members of my family*, you did it to me.” Jesus cares for us as his adopted children.

I began to think about those times in Jesus’ ministry when he was cared for by others, often in the context of an ordinary domestic scene. Jesus had a special relationship with a family in Bethany: Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, offering him a good meal, and a respite from his ministry of healing and teaching. Mary offered her devotion, a listening ear, a focused discipleship. In John, it is she who bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. We know what Jesus did for Lazarus. We do not have a clear record of what Lazarus may have done for Jesus, yet their bond seems to

have been a deeply familial one. They did share table fellowship. Jesus weeps for Lazarus when hearing of his death, even knowing that he will be able to restore Lazarus' life.

My favorite story of disciples who received Jesus, even though he appeared to be a stranger at first, comes from Luke 24. We refer to it now as the “Road to Emmaus” story. It is after Jesus' resurrection but not all the disciples know this news yet. The two disciples who are on the road home are still full of sorrow; they had had hope that Jesus was truly the Messiah. They encounter an apparent stranger. ‘As they came near the village to which they were going, [the stranger] walked ahead as if he were going on. But [the disciples] urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.’ (Luke 24:28-29) It is in the context of a family meal—to which Jesus has been invited—that Jesus is recognized at last.

Are these some of the memories Jesus calls to mind when addressing the disciples for the last time? Even before his death and resurrection he suggests that there is a universal meaning to the loving reception he received from his friends: those friends who welcomed him as family. “Whenever you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) Jesus mentions specific actions: giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, care and presence to those who are sick, isolated, or imprisoned.

I have had cause to be grateful for this kind of caring in recent days! In a note to a friend whose adult kids are assisting me with errands, I expressed what peace that has given me, that I do not need to worry about grocery shopping or other tasks requiring a car. My spirit is able to rest. There is more time and space for me to heal. It occurred to me that this is prayer in action.

Perhaps the nourishment we receive from intercessory prayer is as important as actual food. Even when circumstances hinder us from concrete actions of mercy, we can pray. This is something we can offer to God and neighbor at any time. On my bathroom mirror I have a small prayer card with these words printed on it: “Prayer is the soul’s greatest privilege, its hardest labor, its purest joy.”



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Every so often I am surprised and touched when I learn that someone is praying for me that I didn't know about. There is a woman in my home parish who prays for the clergy she knows on Thursdays, knowing they might need some extra inspiration. A clergy colleague I know, but not well, in response to an email question I had, said she had been praying for me. This lets me know I am never far from God's loving embrace—and encourages me to expand my awareness of how God continually shares his life-giving presence. It is as if there is an underground river of grace connecting me with others in ways I may never know about.

Both the passages from Ezekiel and Matthew refer to shepherds, sheep, and goats. While we mark Christ's kingship and reign today, it is a king that behaves as a shepherd would, with all that implies of love, mercy, and care. Jesus is the self-described Good Shepherd who goes after that one lost sheep, who provides the secure gate. Jesus' voice is the one we learn to know—even as small lambs. What a wonderful echo of Ezekiel this is, who proclaims: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." (Ezekiel 34:16)

None of us really wants to hear that the shepherd also has the task of separating the sheep from the goats, or sheep from sheep. I read that one reason a shepherd might need to separate the sheep from the goats is that goats are more

vulnerable to the cold than woolly sheep and so require extra attention. Aren't we during the course of our lives sometimes the sheep and sometimes the goats? Aren't we sometimes "the least of these?" Even when we experience judgment, we are still in the hands of a shepherd, and that judgment is more an inevitable consequence of being out of relationship with God.

When Jesus tells us the two greatest commandments are to love God with the whole of our being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, I think he meant to show that they cannot really be separated. When our connection to God is seemingly strained or broken, we can find our way back by paying attention to our neighbors, whether family, friends, or strangers. When our human relationships are tested we can ask that God be present in our midst. There is a simple prayer in our prayer book entitled: *For those we love*. "Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to your never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that you are doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*" (BCP, p. 831)

"...The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
The pasture is thy word: the streams, thy grace
Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Out-sing the day-light hours..."

--From *Christmas* by George Herbert