

Becoming Whole

A year ago we began our journey with Jesus, with Matthew as our guide.

Next week, believe it or not, its Advent already, and we shall spend the whole of this new church year with the Gospel of Mark.

And it occurs to me that something that is easy to miss as we spend a year on each gospel writer, is that each of the four Gospel writers has a particular point of view when it comes to telling the story of Jesus.

St. John tends to be the most mystical.

Luke has a profound soft spot for the poor and the outsider.

Mark tells his story like a dime store crime novel, punchy, fast paced, and tying it all up with a shocking ending.

In Matthew's case, his community was very much at odds with the Jewish community and so throughout his gospel we see many examples of "us against them," the "saved and the damned."

In short, probably the earliest Christians weren't so different from you and I.

We, like they, perhaps hear in Jesus that which fits our circumstances, that which speaks to our most pressing needs, and sometimes even that which makes us feel that we're on the right side of things.

So when Matthew brings us to this last parable of Jesus, a parable told only to the inner circle, to the small group of disciples, it is not a surprise that at first blush, this seems to be a parable of the good guys and the bad guys.

On the surface at least, the story of the sheep and the goats at the final judgment is a very simple parable: do good works to people in need and go to heaven — don't do good works and go straight to hell.

End of story.

Very cut and dried.

And also very one-dimensional.

Yet if there is anything that Jesus is not, he is not cut and dried.

Nor is he one-dimensional.

In fact, nearly all the stories Jesus tells have, sort of tucked away in a not too obvious corner, a signal, a hint, that we need to take a step back and look a little deeper.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, the punch in the gut is that a Samaritan could be good!

In the prodigal son, it's that the returning kid is forgiven not for being sorry for what he did, but simply because he is willing to blindly trust in his father's forgiveness.

In today's parable, the hint that all is not what it seems is the great surprise that both the sheep and the goats have when they hear that the standard of judgment is caring for the least, the lost, the last.

Maybe this story isn't so much about who's going to heaven and who's going to hell, as it is about how to live in God's kingdom right here on earth, now, today.

Maybe this story is intended to remind us that Jesus is wandering around today, and the place to find him is in the midst of the least, the last and the lost.

These hints are a way of saying: slow down, look a little closer, because usually Jesus is telling us stuff that's not quite so obvious, he's asking us to look deeper than what our own comfort level wants to hear.

To develop the eyes to see more deeply, we need to look at all of the gospels, at all of the Bible, and ultimately at life itself, through the lens of Jesus hanging in agony on the cross, as he looks over the whole wide world through all time and at all peoples, saying: "Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."

As we do our worst against God, God brings her best to us.

When we bring that focus to bear on every piece of scripture, on every aspect of life, we get closer to standing in the shoes of God — as God stands in relationship to all of humanity — this beloved creation of God, which includes not only you and I, but Presidents Bush and Obama, which includes the Isis killers and the heroic Ebola doctors, which includes the Putins and the Mother Theresa's.

I wonder if Jesus is challenging us to see that stories about weeds and wheat growing up together, and good and bad fish being hauled in together, stories about

the just and unjust, maybe none of these are talking about separate groups of people — you “good folks” over here, you “bad folks” over there — as much as they are talking about our common problem, that we are all of us complex mixtures of right and wrong, of insight and ignorance, of kindness and cruelty.

You need look no further than the motley crew that Jesus calls together to follow him: a band of ignorant, trusting, frightened, hopeful, self-serving, wounded people: a real cross section of the human race that includes tax collectors and prostitutes, rebels and small businessmen.

So when we come to the parable of the sheep and goats, and see it through the eyes of the crucified, forgiving one, perhaps it's point is not separating the good folks over here and the baddies over yonder.

We humans are so good at defining who is good and who isn't; in fact, those definitions lead to so many of our wars, cause so many of our prejudices, and are the ground of perhaps all of our fears.

Instead, I'm thinking today's parable intends to tell us something about ourselves, something about our destinies.

Perhaps the power of this parable is to remind us of the promise that our destiny, ultimately, and in God's own time, is to be made whole, and complete, and wise.

That God's plan for all of us is to finally remove from us our immaturity, and self-absorption, and smallness — sending these off to be consumed in fire, leaving only that which is mature and kind and self-giving.

In other words, peering in on the sheep and the goats through the eyes of Jesus on the cross, dare we say, dare we believe, dare we hope, that at the end of the day, the judgment of God is not punishment, but mercy?

I think this is what Paul is saying today as he holds high the banner of the good news to the people of Ephesus:

“May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power...”

The psalmist sings the same song:

"For the LORD is good;
his mercy is everlasting;
and his faithfulness endures from age to age."

And all we need do is have faith in that power.

Could it be that dumb trust in the love and forgiveness and mercy of this
disconcerting God is the key to the lock of our salvation?

It is said that "the God you imagine creates you." R. Rohn, Yes and..., 12.

Meaning, perhaps, that if we let ourselves be grasped by this tender God of mercy
and forgiveness, then we too might begin to live lives of tenderness and mercy and
forgiveness.

And in living that life, perhaps we shall feel the embrace of "the immeasurable
greatness of his power," a power found always among the least, the lost and the last.

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