

Men Behaving Badly

We often think this is a parable about the final judgment, that great and terrible day when all things are wrapped up, and most certainly it is partly that.

The vision is truly frightening, because everyone is shocked by the standard used for judgment ... and the consequence of being on the wrong side of this judgment seems to be as painful as it is permanent!

And yet, it is "the nations" that are gathered in this story, meaning that something more than simply individual behavior is front and center, meaning that perhaps Jesus is asking us to look at how we operate as nations, collectively as human beings, and how we relate to one another, not just one to one, but as societies.

Perhaps Jesus is asking us to look at the way that God intends creation to be; to explain in no uncertain terms what is needed if we human beings are to live in harmony with one another, which, after all, is the very definition of heaven, isn't it?

While we are often quick to "spiritualize" the stories Jesus tells (which means we don't need to change today!), all of Scripture is in fact focused on how we live our lives here and now.

Remember that Jesus tells this story in 33 AD.

A guerrilla war is happening between a faction of the Jewish people and Rome.

By 68 AD, that limited war becomes a full blown rebellion, and we all know the results: the temple burned to the ground, tens of thousands massacred, and the Jewish people are dispersed throughout the world.

When we rely upon power and weapons and revenge, what we get is hell, not in the next world - not made by God — but hell in this world, made by you and I.

The way to avoid these hells is to learn to travel by a different way; and that is the way of our Lord.

These days, it seems to many that we are moving farther and farther away from our Lord's path, a path that insists that we look out for each other, particularly for the least, the last and the lost.

On a global scale, alliances that once promoted cooperation between nations are rapidly falling apart.

From our own national elections which put "America first," to Great Britain "brexiting" the European Union, to last weeks failed efforts by Germany to form a government, fragmentation, not unity, is the tune we are dancing to.

This fragmentation is not only in the world of politics and international relationships, it's all over our churches as well.

A couple of months ago I told you that there are 30,000 Christian denominations in the world.

I was wrong.

There are actually 46,000 as of last year.

Imagine, the first thousand years of Christianity, the church was essentially one.

Around 1000 A.D. there was the split between Rome and the Orthodox church, and 500 years ago the Protestant Reformation took place.

Division, it seems, is in our blood.

So how do we come together?

How do we live our lives in a way that cooperates rather than rebels against the intent of our Creator?

After all, it's so much easier to float downstream than it is to fight against the current, yet fighting is what seems to delight us far too often.

Perhaps what Jesus is getting at in today's parable is that a society that looks out for the least, the lost, the most vulnerable, is going to be in pretty good shape.

And those that don't — end up creating their own version of hell, marching straight into it when the least, the lost and the most vulnerable are ignored or ridiculed or banished.

I read last week of a congregation that was upset because houseless folks come around.

"Our first duty is to keep our members safe," one fellow said, "not to reach out to folks like that!"

And Jesus weeps...

On the other hand, last Sunday, Arleen Young wheeled a busted up houseless man in his wheelchair to the back door of the church.

He needed a bag of food.

And I wonder if Arleen realized that the guy she was wheeling was Jesus.

I'm reminded of Tom Ishii a couple of years ago, when a man living on the street appeared and had badly soiled himself, which found Tom jumping into action, getting him cleaned up, finding him new clothes, welcoming this fellow human being back to a sense of humanity.

That was Jesus in those soiled pants.

There are so many examples right here in our midst of living out this **new way** of the gospel; which is in fact the very **old way** of our Jewish brothers and sisters - God's way for all of humanity from the very dawn of creation.

We so easily exchange the hard word of God for the softer easier way of our own morals and common sense.

"Safety first," we say, even though God cares less about such things.

Seeing this parable as a challenge to how we live in the here and now world makes a lot of sense because it's exactly what God has in mind when God calls Israel out of slavery.

All of the Commandments and rules and regulations are geared to one simple thing: to create a just, compassionate, relatively equal society.

We, just like the chosen people of Israel, are called not to muddle through in this world, we are called to change the world!

We are called to live a faith that upends our comfortable status quo, our easy allegiance to idols of power and money and greed.

There's a lot of work to be done!

You can't turn on the news without a new iteration of men behaving badly, from Roy Moore to Charlie Rose to Al Franken; not to mention the present occupant of the oval office...

It crosses political lines and it is rooted in power.

Sexual-harassment, sexual abuse, it's all about power, mixed with emotional immaturity; but it's mostly power.

And while those who recognize their misconduct and apologize are probably further along the trail to recovery than those who simply deny, the consequences of preying on the vulnerable are playing out every day, with shame for the perpetrators and lifelong anxiety for the victims.

As Brian McClaren observes,

"The message of today's gospel is that Creation is structured from the very start to produce blessings when the least among us are cared for.

And when they are not cared for, whole societies can crumble". Id., summarized by P. Nuechterlein, paraphrased.

In short, perhaps today's fearsome parable is something like the story of Scrooge, from A Christmas Story.

In that story, the ghosts of past, present and future come to see the old tightwad, angry and malcontent Scrooge — not because his future of loneliness and despair is set in concrete, but to remind him of who he is, to show him what he has become, and to encourage him to change.

As he is led through his life, past, present and future, he begins to see the beauty of the vulnerable, the shame of his own arrogance and greed, and slowly, his heart softens — he rejoins humanity — he “changes his future through repentance.” Id.

We live in the one of the wealthiest nations on earth.

We have the resources to ensure that every person has a minimum livable income, the right not just to access health care, but to actually receive it, to provide a roof over every head and a meal in every belly.

When we allocate our resources in ways that strip away these rights, that keep countless thousands on the streets, broke and sick, well, we are laying the bricks for our own road to hell.

But if today's parable can do for us what the three ghosts did for Scrooge, well, this fearsome story can indeed be transformed into a blessing, because we too can write a new future.

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