

June 23, 20133

The National Presbyterian Church

Treated Like Royalty

Matthew 25:31-46

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons through the spring and summer we're looking together at the teaching of Jesus, especially at the stories that Jesus loved to tell that we call parables. These are stories which contain a spiritual meaning or a spiritual message.

- Largely, they are stories about nature, about the world that God has created. When God created the universe it's as if he placed into every corner of the universe messages that we can unravel. As some scientists have said, even as scientists we're simply "thinking God's thoughts after God." Well Jesus sees the universe, the world of nature, as filled with thoughts about God so he tells stories about nature which have a spiritual meaning.
- And he tells stories about human relationships, every day human relationships that have a spiritual meaning as well.

Some of these stories are short and some of these stories are long. Some of these stories are easy; some of these stories are hard. Some of these stories have an explanation added to them. Some of them have no explanation added to them at all. But these stories, differing as they are, have at least one thing in common: *Almost all of them at least have one thing in common and that is this: they contain a twist. They contain a turn. They contain an exaggeration. They contain something in them which causes those who hear Jesus speaking these stories to say, "Wait a minute. What's going on here? I'm not sure I like that. Are, you really mean that? I'm not even sure I agree."*

Jesus deliberately does this (and he does this not only in the parables, by the way but he does this in the rest of his teaching and you'll never understand Jesus' teaching truly unless you realize that he teaches in order to wake people up and to make them think because through that process we grow. Without that we will not grow. For us to simply say what a nice story Jesus and to walk away would be for the whole purpose to be defeated.)

So this is how he teaches these stories, these parables, these messages which contain spiritual truths. And this is true of the story we read just a few moments ago in the 25th Chapter of Matthew's gospel – a story with a twist, a story with an edge, a story that should make us sit up in our seats and say what in the world is going on here? A story about judgment.

This happens to be the last story that Jesus teaches in the gospel according to Saint Matthew – the last parable he teaches before Jesus celebrates the last supper with his disciples, before he is betrayed, before he is arrested, before he is tried, before he is crucified on a cross, before he dies for your sins and my sins, this is the last story that he teaches. And this context I believe to be really important, really critical. It's as if Jesus wants his disciples to hear this message clearly, this particular story, before he leaves them; as if Jesus were saying to his disciples,

“In a few hours I’m going to die; going to die for your sins. The Friday on which I die will be “good,” my death in some sense will be glorious, because it will remove every sin, every barrier between you and God, so that you can have a restored relationship with God, a renewed relationship with God. Your guilt, your sin will be gone forever. It will be a gift of sheer grace for you. This is what is about to happen a new relationship with God that we cannot earn and do not deserve given to us on a plate.”

Some of us may have a hard time with this. We’ve been raised on ambition, we’ve been raised on success and achievement, and we need to earn what we get. But Jesus turns to all of us as if to say “this relationship with God is one thing you cannot earn. You cannot do anything to restore your broken relationship with God.” In fact Jesus dies for us, he goes to such lengths, such depths, precisely because you and I are incapable of doing anything ourselves to restore our relationship with God – so Jesus does it for us; Jesus alone is perfect and perfect even in his death on our behalf, precisely because you and I cannot be perfect. All of this is about to happen. He is about to die for our sins and this should be liberating good news to us. We no longer need to keep up pretenses. We no longer need to claim that we are somebody that we are not. We no longer need to try to be like Hyacinth Bucket in the PBS comedy “Keeping Up Appearances” . . . otherwise known as Hyacinth “Boo-kay”!! Spending her life trying to impress others. Jesus says “Don’t bother, don’t try. You can’t do it without me. I died for you as your savior because you cannot be good enough for God.”

He loves us as we are, but . . . as the cliché puts it; he also *loves us too much to leave us as we are.*” ***If Jesus is about to die to be our only Savior, he is also about to die and rise again to be our Lord:*** our Savior *and* our Lord. The one who calls the shots in our life. The one who is the boss in our life. The one to whom we give absolute sovereignty and sway within our lives so that our lives are changed by his presence . . . not to earn our way into Heaven but so that we can be his effective friends and ambassadors and representatives here on earth. Changed lives: good behavior can place a claim on God as if to say, “God, look, I’m good enough for you to receive me – (it cannot happen! No one can place God within our debt!). But “changed lives” so that when others look at us, in some small way they see Jesus Christ.

He says to his disciples as he leaves them, “*I give you my life. Remember this! But remember too that you bear my name. You bear my logo. You are my representatives. You are my brand here on earth. People will know me because of you.*” And his standards are high! Very high indeed.

And that’s the context in which Jesus tells this story leaving his disciples on his way to his death to be their Savior *and* to be their Lord. This is the last story Jesus leaves with them (in Matthew’s account) and he begins it like this:

When the “Son of Man” comes in his glory . . .

(the “Son of Man,” by the way, is a title that Jesus gives to himself – so Jesus is saying that he is going away, but he is also going to return, come again)

. . . and all the angels with him . . .

(he leaves in humiliation and he’s going to come again in power. He leaves to be our savior, he’s coming again to be our Lord)

. . . then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations . . .

(which includes you and me)

. . . will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another . . .

(he’ll make distinctions, make judgments)

. . . as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

(Jesus, remember, is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. And in laying down his life for the sheep he becomes our Lord and our master as well.)

And he will put the sheep in his right hand and the goats at the left.

(In other words, says Jesus, there's going to be a big event coming down the pike: a parting of the ways. And this parting of the ways is going to be based not only on our faith in Jesus but on the way we behave as his followers. Not only our trusting in him as our Savior but in our obedience in him as our Lord.)

Then the king . . .

(Jesus, the Son of Man, is our Shepherd, but also our King, our Lord)

. . . 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 for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked, you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me."

(What we do with Jesus, how we treat him is integral to how we're going to be treated in this final judgment. It is the number one issue. What we do with this Jesus who gives his life to us as our savior and our Lord, when it comes to this day how we treat him will be critical. But that's only the beginning of what Jesus says. 'How we treat Jesus' might well be an expected standard of accountability from those who hear and follow him. What Jesus goes on to say, though, is this, that if that vertical relationship with Jesus as savior does not translate into horizontal relationships with Jesus' people here on Earth and the way we treat them, then that relationship, that spiritual relationship with Jesus adds up to nothing: adds up to nothing. The vertical must become horizontal. Jesus puts it like this.

Let me read part of that story again and then continue . . .

"I was hungry you gave me food – yes. I was thirsty you gave me something to drink – yes *Jesus we loved you.* I was a stranger and you welcomed me – yes. 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."

Then the righteous will answer (*well come to think of it, I'm not sure we saw you in all these roles*): "Lord when was it we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty, gave you something to drink? When was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I say to you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and my sisters, you did it to me."

(Do you see? The vertical becomes horizontal. The spiritual becomes practical and earthly. The Heavenly moves down into the realm in which we live.)

John in his first letter (1 John 4:20) puts it most succinctly when he says this: *How can you say you love God whom you have not seen and you do not love your neighbor whom you have seen?* Much more recently C.S. Lewis (in *The Weight of Glory*)¹ put it like this. He said, "*Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.*"

Turn around and look at your neighbor: next to the Blessed Sacrament itself that person on either side is the holiest object presented to your senses. Made in the image of God like you; one for whom Christ died, like you; one for whom Christ lives and always keeps in mind never for a moment forgetting, like you. Treated like royalty by Jesus, just like you.

And he says to us ***“If this is who I’ve been for you this is who you are called to be for them.”***

Sometimes we can do this on a small scale. Sometimes though the scale needs to be big.

On a small scale Rachel Naomi Remen (*My Grandfather’s Blessings*)² tells a wonderful story about a time when she was working in a teaching hospital in New York and she witnessed this kind of caring “for the least” in a wonderful way.

A young girl called Immy was in the hospital for heart surgery. When Dr. Remen met Immy she was wearing a Saint Christopher medallion, a pin, a reminder that Jesus was with her in this trip to the hospital on this journey that she did not wish for. [Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travelers: the name “Christopher” means “Christ bearer,” one who goes with us, indeed, carries us, through all kinds of journeys.] So she had this pin, and she thought of it as a way of knowing that Jesus was with her. But before the day of the surgery she changed her robe and forgot to take the pin off. So the robe, the hospital gown, went down to the laundry room and with it the pin, and she was bereft and so were her family.

The family mentioned this loss to a young resident who came in and paid little attention to their anxiety, telling them not to worry about it, that they were in good hands with the skilled physicians and nurses. But she did worry. It was a touchable, tangible sign that she wanted and needed. Dr. Remen, though, was concerned for the family, and while hesitant, decided to write a brief note to Immy’s surgeon about the loss. The next day the surgeon came in, followed by a group of around a dozen young surgeons all in training. They watched “the expert” as he moved into this room and began asking the kind of questions you ask just before surgery. And then (as the family described it later) what happened next was entirely unexpected. He turned to this group of about-to-be surgeons and told them that the next stop was the elevator, going down to the laundry room. He took them all down to the laundry room! And there, together, they looked through all the robes that had been washed until they found one which had a pin on it – the Saint Christopher medallion – and brought it back up to this little girl.

Well you can imagine the faces of the family were smiling when they told this story to Dr. Remen: Not just because the medallion had been found, but because this surgeon and his entourage had taken time to do this for them. They’d been treated like royalty, as if they were important. Not just pawns caught up in the system, feeling small and lost, but treated like royalty: the “least of these” feeling as if they were important.

And this is what Christ calls us to do for others, as we would want others to do for us, and as Christ *has done* for us, in living for us and dying for us and rising again.

And he calls us to do this not just by ourselves but with others. Small scale, maybe we can handle individually. But big scale? We need each other!

I dare say that even on a small scale we achieve less if we go it alone than if we “go it” together. Think of the surgeon: if he had gone down to the laundry room by himself he’d have taken ages to find this medallion and perhaps would never have found it. But with others, together? Ah, it could be found: *they did together what he couldn’t have done by himself*.

There is so much in what Jesus teaches us that we simply cannot do by ourselves. It’s overwhelming when we think of it . . . by ourselves. Jesus says to those who are around about

him, *you need to feed the hungry; you need to clothe the naked; you need to give drink to the thirsty; you need to welcome strangers; you need to visit prisoners; you need to care for the sick. You need to treat them like royalty, as if they were me!* When I hear that I say “I can’t do it. It’s too much Jesus!” I don’t know of anybody else who can . . . by themselves. But together? Maybe we still can’t solve it all, but together we can surely make a powerful impact and some radical changes for good:

- Feeding the hungry isn’t just about giving handouts; surely it’s also about creating jobs so that people don’t need to be hungry in the first place! I cannot do all of this, but I know of Christians who are entrepreneurs who can – who can create jobs and organizations so that people can earn what they have so they can feed themselves.
- Clothing the naked or giving drink to the thirsty isn’t *just* about clothes or a cup of water (though it is about that). There is so much water in this world of ours that isn’t fit to drink, yet still people with no other options drink it! We need people and organizations who know how to clean up the water and provide the systems by which it can be delivered to others.
- Welcoming strangers and visiting prisoners? Ah, yes we can do that one by one. But the impact of a team, of a group, is far more powerful. And who are these strangers and who are these prisoners? Some of them are in the world near us, around about us, yet unnoticed.
 - I don’t know if you know but estimates range from 15 to 46 million people who are refugees of one kind or another – strangers in a world not of their own choosing.
 - And in our own area there are thousands unknown unseen trafficked for sex or for labor: slaves, prisoners, all around us.

What can we do for these strangers and prisoners? By myself – precious little. But with others – more than we can imagine.

- And the same is true in caring for the sick. We know of people who are close to us whose names we know, and we care for them. But what about those we do not know who need help and for whom there is no ready help at hand? Those who slip between the cracks and it seems as if there’s nothing we can do.
 - If you look back over the history of Christian missions over the last 100-150 years, there were three things that missionaries set out to do together, by forming organizations and institutions, together: (1) to establish churches to bring people to Christ so that they might worship God through Jesus Christ; (2) to establish schools; (3) and to establish hospitals where the caring for the sick could be done in Jesus’ name.

In one of the congregations I served (and this happened before I arrived there so I can take no credit) the church and other churches gathered together to become strong together, and they looked at the community and discovered that there were many people falling between the cracks with regard to health care. They were working, the “working poor.” Working sometimes one job, sometimes two, sometimes three and yet unable to afford the care that they need.

So, together, these congregations started what’s called a free medical clinic – Saint Luke’s Free Medical Clinic – with volunteers: doctors, nurses, others, caring for those who are working hard but simply cannot care for themselves.

Alone? Impossible!! Together? Possible!!

What we can do together is amazing – but here is Jesus’ point: *this is not just what we can do, it’s what we must do as Christians and as a church, as those who we bear his name and acknowledge him as the one who lived for us and died for us and who calls us to reflect his love in this world in which we live.*

There are many twists in this particular parable, this particular story, which cause us to sit up and to think and to say “I’m not sure I like that. I don’t like where Jesus is going.” But perhaps the most serious twist of them all comes at the end of the story when Jesus speaks about those who are condemned. What’s fascinating and serious about this is that *these people would not appear as if they were bad people at all.* Jesus doesn’t condemn them for being murderers or adulterers or thieves. He condemns them for not getting around to doing the good they ought to do.

This is what he says to those at his left hand:

You that are accursed depart from me for I was hungry you gave me no food; I was thirsty you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger you did not welcome me; naked you did not give me clothing; sick and in prison you did not visit me. Then they will answer Lord when was it we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?

(Notice they call him “Lord” but they don’t treat others as they have been treated by this Lord.)

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. These will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life. Tough stuff. Huge call. Do a little by myself but I cannot do it by myself unless others are in it with me. This is a word to the church before Jesus goes on his way to die. This is who we have been called to be.

Martin Luther the great reformer sums it up best I think like this. He says,

Here below says Christ you find me in the poor. I am too high for you in Heaven. You are trying to climb up there for nothing. Thus it would be a very good idea that this high command of love were written with golden letters on all the foreheads of the poor so that we could see and grasp how near Christ is to us on this planet. But doing this would not be possible if Christ did not bring this into our heart (quoted in F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*)³.

May Christ, the one who treats us as royalty, living and dying for us, bring this message and passion into our heart and into our hands and feet – that we might treat others as we have been treated by Christ: as royalty, alone and together.

Let us pray. Holy God, amaze us with the depth of your love for us that you should notice us and treat us as royalty. Give us grace to overcome our prejudices and our thoughts and our thoughtlessness and treat others as you have treated us, as if they were you. It is in your name we pray, Amen.

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001)
2. Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Hardcover, 2000) pp. 112-115.
3. F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew, a Commentary, Vol. 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) p. 923.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2013 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800