

Christ the King Sunday November 22 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

Steve Lopez, a *Los Angeles Times* columnist, met Nathaniel Ayers as a homeless musician on skid row in Los Angeles. Nathaniel was playing a violin with two strings and had an orange shopping cart that contained all of his belongings, including a huge plastic water gun, a single black boot and his violin case. On the cart was written- "Little Walt Disney Concert Hall -- Beethoven."

Instead of seeing just another crazy homeless person sawing at a broken instrument, Lopez heard the talent coming through those two strings, approached Ayers and engaged him in conversation, about his music and his life. Ayers suffers from schizophrenia and would often slip into non-sequiturs making conversation hard to follow sometimes. Yet over time, they became friends.

Lopez says his friendship with Ayers has "always been a two-way street, it's not just me doing for him." The writer explains that the musician reignited his passion for journalism and gave him a sense of well-being: "You know, there's this humility, there's this good feeling I have from giving something,"

Whether he would name it as such, Lopez has entered into the joy of his master. Remember that from last week? Mr. Lopez gave this homeless man on the street what he had already received: attention, respect, honor, dignity. And in so doing, Lopez received a taste of the joy God receives in

giving those things to us. This, “good feeling”, as he described it. Have you ever felt that good feeling from giving something? Who was it you helped?

I have no idea if Mr. Lopez is a Christian or not, but based on our text today we can say with certainty that Mr. Lopez met Jesus that day and has been in a friendship with him for the last 15 years.

When I was at First Lutheran as the Director of Teen Ministry I remember hearing from a couple of my high school students about an encounter they had over the weekend. They had been over in the Northland Mall area and seen a man sitting with a sign in the median asking for food as he was out of work. They pulled into the lot close by and approached this gentleman, telling him they didn’t have any money or food, but then sat down with him and gave him their time, their attention and interest. Talking with him about his life and how he had gotten there.

These two young adults encountered Jesus that day, sat down on the grass and talked with him. They, too, entered into the joy of their master as they experienced not the flat stereotype we carry of people of hold those signs in the median (be honest, what do you mostly think when you see them?), instead, they experienced the reality of a living breathing human being- with a family, with hopes and dreams, with failures and flaws. Just like us.

Our text from Matthew is a familiar one for many of us- the Judgment of the Nations it is titled in many bibles. We may have heard pastors preach on

this text for years. It is a charge, they tell us, for us each to go into the world and feed the hungry, visit those in prison, clothe the naked. I mean, there is a ministry based in Cedar Rapids called Matthew 25 that focuses on feeding the hungry through things like community gardens, shelters the homeless through programs to help people who have a place to stay but are in need of repairs, who strive to better the lives of the least of these. St. John has even entered this understanding as we have re-affirmed our own commitment to be a Matthew 25 congregation that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and shelters the homeless. But I wonder if it is so familiar a text we have missed some important details.

First, it is the judgment of the nations. We, particularly in America, tend to hear this text in individual terms. How we, personally, have or have not fed the hungry, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless. Rather, this is about the behavior of nations, groups of people. The judgment is upon them all.

Now this, Israelites know about. For it is the language God has used with them from the beginning. It is the message God sends through the prophets when Israel is not caring for the widows and orphans, those with no safety net. When they abuse the aliens in their land- foreigners. Follow my commands, God says through those prophets, and attend to these people in need or bad things will result for the nation.

Second, everyone in this story except for the king is surprised. Everyone. Sheep and goats, right hand and left, neither anticipates that when they are dealing with the least of these, they actually encounter Jesus, the king, the

divine. Incarnated, made flesh in the one we would be inclined to look past, to fear, to despise, to feel superior to, to judge. God showing up where we least expect God to be present. Sound familiar? God, come in a child lying in a manger. God bloody and broken on a cross.

You can almost hear the sheep and the goats respond to the king, “Um... you’re a pretty distinctive fellow... pretty sure I would remember you. When did we meet again?” Or even more those who thought themselves righteous protesting, “No, wait! I’ve been looking for you! If I knew it was you...” Neither of these knew that Jesus had been present with them the whole time. Their actions came not with thought of reward or punishment but out of the depth of their character. Their understanding of who God called them to be.

Third, this encounter with the living God is not one that you must prepare yourself for, go on a spiritual journey, enter into a building, come to worship to have. A physical, immediate encounter with God is as close as the nearest person in need. The one who is least in our society.

And the promise is, in that encounter, we find salvation. Salvation come to us in physical form, in the most base, the most simple, the most plain thing we can imagine. Does that also sound familiar? Bread and wine- Body and Blood? God made incarnate. God we can see, taste, touch, smell.

As the hymn reminds us, God is not in some heaven light years away, but here, present with us, always- until the end of the age... in the person on welfare. In the human being suffering from schizophrenia on the street. In

the 10% of lowans who struggle with hunger. As we feed them, as we comfort them, as we shelter them we encounter, we find, Jesus.

And... we are Jesus for them.

Isn't that wild? To imagine that in that encounter we both meet Jesus and are Jesus? In a very real way.

But it makes sense, doesn't it? For Jesus is God come to us in the flesh. God come to save us- to bring us what we need in abundance. To love us unconditionally. To spend time with us, sitting, listening, asking, resting.

You want to see Jesus? You want to experience the divine? Okay, the author of Matthew says, go help someone who is in need.

My friends, Jesus has come to our door four times already this month. In Doug who needed help to make rent for December. In Lee and Jean who both needed help paying an electric bill that was due before they applied for LIHEAP. In Kay who was in a negative balance in her bank account due to unforeseen expenses.

It is through your generosity that we gave Dan a place to sleep for another month. That we kept Lee and Jean warm. That we helped keep Kay from slipping into the cycle that just leads to financial enslavement. It is one of the joys of my call to meet Jesus in these moments and to experience, as Mr. Lopez said, the good feeling of giving something. And all of you have

participated in that as part of this community of faith. For we are in this thing together. Judgement of the nations.

And even so, I know you, my friends. I know that each of you have had those encounters in your life. That you have done these things for others in quiet and unacknowledged ways. That you have experienced the joy of our master in those encounters, had the good feeling of giving something.

And I trust that each of us will have the unexpected pleasure of Jesus greeting us on that great getting up day and saying, "Good to see you again, well done, my good and faithful servant."

Our king, Jesus, is a peculiar kind of king, one who comes to us in the simplest of packages. The bread and wine we will share in this Meal of communion. In the people in need around us. In us, as we help those in need. As we proclaim that Jesus in word and deed.

So, come to this table and be fed, then go into the world with eyes wide open. Looking. Wondering, where is Jesus? And knowing that he is there; in the Cedar Rapiidian still with no roof, in the hungry lining up at Linn Community Food Bank, in the children who have no winter outerwear at College Community Schools... and most importantly in you. God's own claimed, called, and beloved.