

Matthew 25:31-46

As a youth pastor, I have noticed that parents who have a high school senior start to panic around the month(s) of April and May. These parents and seniors only have a few more months left together before their senior goes off to college. And, with several parents of a senior, I have noticed they start to freak out that they have not taught their senior everything there is to know about how to live on their own. I once had a parent come to me talking about their own senior and they said, “my senior barely knows how to cook and knowing how to do their own laundry and clean is debatable, I mean you should see the state of their bedroom. Additionally, my senior does not even know how to pick up their own medicine and I do it for them so I think my senior is going to struggle majorly next year and I feel like I have not taught my senior enough.” Well, in all reality this is probably a common worry or concern that most senior parents have, but the reason I tell you this story is because I often wonder if Jesus thought the same thing with his own disciples before he was crucified on the cross and went to be with the Father. I often wonder if Jesus ever thought, “have I taught my disciples enough?” and “will they be able to live on their own and carry out the good news of the Gospel and my mission, even after I am gone?”

These questions become prominent in our Scripture passage that we just read from the gospel of Matthew, Matthew chapter 25, verses 31-46 as it is the “last text before the story of the passion begins, and at the same time, it is Jesus' last instruction to his disciples.¹” It follows numerous parables about

¹ Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 21-28*. Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005. muse.jhu.edu/book/45973., pg. 264.

being ready for whatever is coming, whenever it gets here and preparing Jesus' disciples. This passage takes place with Jesus in Jerusalem teaching, reminding his disciples of their accountability to reach out and serve one another, even after Jesus departs to go to be with the Father, and Jesus pronouncing judgment on the nations if they fail to do so. Verses 31-33 introduce the judgment scene with verse 46 providing a conclusion of the final fate of the righteous and the unloving. So, these words from Jesus within Matthew 25 teach us how to care for one another, and the consequences for not caring for one another and the judgment that will occur if we choose not to.

In this passage, Jesus tells his disciples about judgment day as Jesus imagines a final judgment and a great division of the nations. One common theme within most judgment passages contained within scripture is that Jesus will separate the good from the wicked or in this case, the sheep from the goats. So, the metaphor that Jesus uses in verses 31-33 of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats and “dividing goats and sheep at the end of a grazing day illustrates this upcoming judgment.”² In order to understand this metaphor, we must realize how in Palestine during that time period, mixed flocks were quite common. In the evening, it was customary for the shepherd to separate the flock and bring the goats inside. The goats needed warmth for the night while the sheep preferred the cool night air. This story is not concerned with the value of either sheep or goats, but rather provides an illustration of a common known separating process to show how the sheep

² The, Foundry Publishing. *NBBC, Matthew : A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, The Foundry Publishing, 2019. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, pg. 364

(righteous) are those who do acts of mercy to all who are in need, while the goats (accursed) are those who do not respond. Thus, it is this parable in Matthew 25 that pictures the end time when Jesus will judge the nations and separate them like a shepherd separates his sheep and goats so that the sheep will be at the right hand of Jesus and the goats will be on the left hand of Jesus, which marks the king's favor to the sheep on the right side and disapproval of the goats on the left side.³

Jesus' message in this passage in Matthew is a famous one: whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me. This appears in verse 40 as the first group, those at his right hand (the sheep), that Jesus describes within verses 34-40 follow Jesus' example and teachings and are being separated for a reward and blessing, which includes the gift of the kingdom of heaven and eternal life that is discussed in verse 46. The reason for this is because they have extended hospitality and acted in compassion and kindness toward the least of these brothers and sisters of the Lord.

However, the second group, those at his left hand (the goats), described in verses 41-45 have failed miserably. While circumstances required hospitality, compassion, and kindness, this group neglected those in need. As one biblical scholar by the name of Robert S. Snow points out, their "judgment rests not on acts of wickedness, but on their failure to respond compassionately when faced with human despair and the needs of others."⁴

³ Ibid, 364

⁴ The, Foundry Publishing. *NBBC, Matthew : A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, The Foundry Publishing, 2019. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, pg. 364

It is in Matthew 25 that Jesus describes “works of love that some have done for Jesus and others have not done within verses 35-36 and verses 42-43.⁵” The works of love include: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, inviting the stranger in, clothing the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. These are all acts of loving kindness. For, we as disciples of Christ, are called to demonstrate and live out our faith by performing acts of loving-kindness like the ones described above.

Not only does this parable of the sheep and goats found in our gospel passage, Matthew 25 confirm this, but the expression of this truth can be powerfully conveyed through the Hebrew word, *hesed*. *Hesed* is one of my favorite Hebrew terms that has a wide range of meanings, but most often describes the grace, mercy, compassion, steadfast love, and faithfulness of God. Because *hesed* expresses essential attributes of God’s character and divine being, this list cannot fully convey the true meaning of God’s *hesed*. However, the core idea of this Hebrew term, *hesed*, communicates love, loyalty, devotion, and faithfulness within a relationship. It is a deeply relational concept. Thus, the term, *hesed* is closely related to God’s covenant relationship with God’s own people. I will always remember what Dr. Brisson, my professor of Greek and Hebrew languages during Seminary said about *hesed*, which is that this Hebrew noun, *hesed*, “comes closest to saying what human words can never finish saying.⁶”

⁵ Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 21-28*. Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005. muse.jhu.edu/book/45973., pg. 264.

⁶ Dr. Brisson, Union Presbyterian Seminary

From Dr. Brisson's teachings, we were taught that the English word, "kindness" translates the Hebrew word, *hesed* which is very common in the bible, but its meaning can hardly be conveyed by any single English word as it is so rich in meaning. Because it is so rich in meaning, we must remember that HESED describes the overwhelming and abundant love that the Lord has for God's people, the love that the Lord expects and requires from God's people, and the love that we MUST exhibit to one another. Hesed helps us understand that our help, care, concern, compassion, and love for our neighbors must be as wide as the love of God and Christ Jesus our Lord. It is critical to recognize that *what we do* matters to God and **how we treat others** is important to God. In fact, some Liberation theologians, like Gustavo Guitierrez, would say "There is no way to God that **bypasses** the "sacrament of our neighbor," for "love of God is unavoidably expressed through love of one's neighbor."⁷

Let me share with you all a beautifully written excerpt from one of Leo Tolstoy's beloved short stories "Where Love Is, There God Is Also".

"In this story, there was a cobbler/ shoemaker named Martyn who was suffering tragedy after tragedy, losing one by one those he loved the most, suffering heartbreak, and dealing with grief to the point it seemed to him that the only thing left to live for is death. He mourned the death of his only child, but one day, he heard the voice of Christ promising that he will come to him

⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) 194, 200-203;

tomorrow. So, Martyn spent the next day sitting by the only window of which looked out onto the street in his tiny room in the basement and waiting. Various people came by. First was an old man who is exhausted from shoveling snow. Then came the wife of a soldier with a small child; both of them were freezing. The third visit was from an old woman who was arguing with a young street merchant over a stolen apple. Martyn allows them to come in and speaks with them and gives them each something to eat and drink. At the end of that very same day, Martyn opened his New Testament that he bought in large print and began to read. Not until he reads Matthew 25, verse 35 and verse 40 that evening does he understand that those three people who came to visit were Christ.⁸”

What this excerpt from this story depicts is that this humble old cobbler named Martyn who waits all day for the promised visit of Christ comes to discover that by helping those around him, he has already received Jesus Christ as those three people who came to visit were Christ. This story confirms that God is the love that resides in all people and that our love of God and Jesus Christ must also be understood as the love of one’s neighbor. This concentration on loving God by loving our neighbors found its most powerful expression through the character of Martyn in this story. This is because Martyn took these three visitors in, showing them love, compassion, and hospitality and provided for their needs of food and water. Martyn lived

⁸ Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 21-28*. Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005. muse.jhu.edu/book/45973., pg. 268

out the call contained within Matthew 25. Are we going to be able to do the same?

For it is Matthew 25 that calls us to do something about our broken world, one day at a time, one act at a time, for as long as it takes so that those who are lonely and hurting are not alone, those who are poor, homeless, and hungry are not without help, and the cry of the vulnerable and victimized is met and attended to. Our love for God must be extended to include all of our neighbors. The two are interconnected.

For love has the power to transform all people, places, and things. And Matthew 25 accentuates our responsibility as the body of Christ to “live out the life of Jesus here on earth by making the love of God visible in our time and in our community⁹” by loving in such a way that resists injustice, works to transform community, and meets the needs of all of our neighbors and brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the beginning of this sermon, I raised the question of whether or not Jesus ever thought, “have I taught my twelve disciples enough?” and “will they be able to live on their own and carry out the good news of the Gospel and my mission, even after I am gone?” In the same way that I think Jesus may have been concerned about his twelve disciples living the way that he taught them to live, in accordance with Matthew 25, I often think back to that conversation I had with that parent about their high school senior and must confess that my main concern **was not** what their parent was expressing to me. The reason for this is because they will learn how to be adults and do

⁹ Ibid, 34.

things such as clean, cook, pick up their medications, and do laundry through the experiences they gain in college and the people they meet and become friends with. I cannot tell you how many people in college I had to teach how to do laundry in our communal laundry room in the basement of Georgia Hall at Presbyterian College. Some people even paid me to do their laundry for them. Hey, I was not complaining. I was a poor college student. I needed some extra money.

But back to that conversation, I was not worried about that high school senior being prepared enough to do things on their own. Rather, what kept coming to mind throughout our conversation was, will their high school senior know how to be a good friend and care for others, and know how to start again in creating and cultivating friendships? This is because part of being a good friend entails helping those in need and in times of crisis and showing love, compassion, and care to folks on campus, especially new folks who might even be homesick. This matches with the biblical mandate that we are given in Matthew 25.

Recently, I attended a conference in Montreat called, “Holy Shift,” where we learned about some of the seismic shifts and changes that have occurred in the church since Covid. While watching church virtually has been one of those major shifts, we learned that some groups of people have disappeared altogether and sadly this group primarily consists of youth and young adults. The statistics when it came to youth and young adults leaving the church after high school and never returning were alarming. One statistic showed that among Mainline Protestant churches, 50% of the average congregation is now over 65 years of age, which begs the question of where

the young people are at.¹⁰ Well 30% of attendees under the age of 35, which includes all children, youth, and young adults is on the decline from 37% in 2020, to 35% in 2021, and now, 32% in 2023.¹¹ These statistics are saddening, but as people of faith, this is NOT where we want to stay. In one workshop that I was in throughout this conference titled, “Are Youth Seeking the Unicorn Church?,” we reconsidered these statistics and flipped the script. We considered what we loved about the church as a youth ourselves, what we love about the church now, and did a little dreaming and envisioning about what our unicorn church might look like for the sake of our children, youth, and young adults today so that we can bring them back to the church.

So, today I brought with me my friend Lola, who is a unicorn squishmellow of one of my youth here at SMPC, to help you think about this concept of a ‘unicorn church’ in conjunction with Matthew 25. Just like Unicorns are magical creatures that typically resemble a horse with one horn on top of its forehead, if you could imagine and design your own unicorn church in conjunction with our call in Matthew 25.,

- What would it look like/ feel like?
- Who would be included and invited?
- What would leadership look like?
- What would programming look like?
- How would you describe the worship, faith formation, and the church building of your unicorn church?

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¹¹ <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf>

In response to the questions I just presented that are also on the screens, I would invite you to turn to the back of your bulletin and use the pencils that are in the pews and meditate and reflect on what your unicorn church might look like in conjunction with our call in Matthew 25. You can draw or use words to do this. If you are stuck on this, some examples you might draw or write on your unicorn church would be that it would be a church where everyone knew everyone's name, where people moved from feeling welcomed to actually belonging, where pride stickers were on the windows of the church to show that we welcome and support the LGBTQIA community, or a church where the least of our brothers and sisters in Christ, those in need, joined us for a meal each week. I am going to give you each a few minutes to design and contemplate what your unicorn church in conjunction with our call in Matthew 25 would look like and feel like, while Zach plays some background music.

Give 4-5 minutes

Thinking about your unicorn church, I want you to circle one or two things that you will commit to doing and allow these things you circled to be your first step into living into our call contained within Matthew 25.

Because as we think about our lives and the future of the church in conjunction with Matthew 25, we are called to move from being participants in worship to participating in God's mission and what God is up to within our world today.

So as you go forth from Worship today, I challenge you to think about how you will begin to lean into our call contained within Matthew 25?

In considering this question, it is my hope that these words from Dr. Martin Luther King will inspire you. Dr. King reflects on his life and how he would like to be remembered as he responds to this question, “if Christ is King, what does that mean?” In response to this question, he tells his beloved congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church this :

“If Christ is ruler over our lives, then my Nobel Peace Prize is less important than me trying to feed the hungry. If Christ is King, then my invitations to the White House are less important than those I visited in prison. If Christ is Lord, then me being TIME magazine’s “Man of the Year” is less important than that I tried to love extravagantly, dangerously, with all my being (*I Have a Dream Speech*, pg. 191).

This quote by Dr. King was told to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church just two months before his untimely funeral. Friends, today is Christ the King Sunday where we acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ, meaning Christ’ reign or rule. On Christ the King Sunday, we affirm Christ as our sovereign ruler “and how Christ calls us to a loyalty and faith that transcends every earthly claim on the human heart.¹²” So, as we acknowledge Christ the King Sunday alongside Matthew 25, let us remember that Christ is unlike any other earthly king as Christ promises to bring about a new world order in which the focus and priority is on “the least of these” deemed by

¹² <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/christ-king-reign-christ/>

society, and how we have an instrumental role in helping to bring this new order and reality about.

But in order to help bring this new world order or new kingdom about, we must follow and live into the call that Christ gives to us in our passage from Matthew 25 for the sake of all of God’s creation, especially **those who are lonely, hurting, poor, homeless, vulnerable or victimized**, and for all the young people who have left the church.

In considering the future of the church and what Matthew 25 requires of us, Letty Russell’s words from her book titled, *The Church in the Round*, are particularly powerful. She says a church must “look for ways that God reaches out to include all those whom society and religion have declared outsiders and invite them to gather round God’s table of hospitality that welcomes all.¹³”

As a church, we have work to do to reach out, love, and serve the least of these so that we can create God’s kingdom and bring everyone back into our fold. Jesus is calling us to let our faith in Christ manifest itself in having compassion, love, and empathy for the least of these, and living out our call to give food to the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned. Let us remember that our youth and young adults look up to us in modeling this behavior so let’s help them know what the church and God’s creation **should** look like, which is a place of love and

¹³ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 25.

radical hospitality, so they will return to church, seeking to do the same in living out our call contained within Matthew 25. Amen.