

Thankful for a Promise

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Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill NC
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Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Human Child comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king 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 and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 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 him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

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.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Let's talk about *where Jesus is*. I know, it doesn't seem there are a lot of us these days worrying about *where Jesus is*. On one side they figure they already know: he is watching disapprovingly from above and planning a big comeback. And on the other side, well, who cares?

On the one side are the self-proclaimed sheep of God's pasture.... sure that we are in very good shape indeed, because we know exactly who Christ is, where Christ is, and what Christ thinks on every subject from abortion to war. Surely if you are that sure of yourself, you must be saved!

And then there are also us self-defined goats. We are equally sure... (a) that there is no God, not much that is holy; or (b) that Christ is either long gone or never was; or (c) that none of that matters too much. Why worry about things you cannot see? God? In the immortal words of Charles Dickens, *Bah humbug!* But for better or for worse, a few of us go around with a bit more wonder in our hearts and doubt in our minds. Who, after all, can claim absolute certainty all the time? Some have enough capacity for mystery and miracle, to wonder if it is possible personally, somehow, someday, that we will cross paths with Jesus, in the spirit, or even... in the flesh.

Almost two thousand years ago, young rabbi Jesus was asked by his disciples what the signs would be of the messiah's coming, of the end of the age.... The more he said in answer, the less sure those askers should have been, about their own situation or conventional religious wisdom. Instead of talking just about some day in the future when Christ would return, at one point Jesus started talking as though the messiah, the anointed one, would be around them right along, hiding where they least expected.

Sure, when the Day of Judgment comes, he suggested, there might indeed be the separation that righteous folk love, separating out the sheep from the goats. This was familiar language to his listeners then, just as it is to anyone who has ever listened to a good old-fashioned preacher ever since.

Only thing was, these sheep and goats in Jesus' parable looked a little different than the conventional preacherly division of livestock. Rather than talking about personal morality, or purity, or correct prayer life or sacred piety and religious practices, Jesus made the defining issue that of welcome. Who was hospitable to the stranger? Who offered a glass of cool water to a traveler? Who gave a little food to a hungry person, or some clothing to a person exposed. Those who welcomed others would be themselves welcomed by the messiah. Those who sought no reward for being kind, or considerate, or helpful, or healing, would be the ones to receive God's thanks and welcome themselves. Because, unknown to them, every time they were helping out a stranger, a prisoner or a sojourner, someone who was vulnerable and in need, it was in fact the messiah there, being helped: the Child of Humanity, hiding in the heart of human adversity.

And then, as he spun out his parable of the Last Day, Jesus also dwelt on those who had turned away without offering that bit of water, or food, or shelter or clothing. Unknown to themselves, they too had been in Christ's presence all that time, and they had turned the messiah away, unfed, unwatered, naked and cold. I will never forget the Thanksgiving Day, shortly after we were married, when Lynn and I had quite a few of our family on both sides, to the old parsonage we lived in, in Western Massachusetts. Picture a beautiful cozy old wooden house, near the Connecticut River, built in 1830-something. Candles on the table, and our best china out. We had just sat down to eat that day, when the doorbell rang. There on the edge of the state highway that went by our door stood a confused looking young man, who let us know in no uncertain terms how hungry he was. What to do?

Lynn, being the very soul of hospitality, found an extra chair, and made room at the table. The young man sat with us, and ate. Now he wasn't your usual houseguest. It was pretty clear from the way he wandered off mid-meal into Lynn's study, and was staring at one of the pictures, claiming to know the person in the picture, that he was a bit unusual. By the time we had eaten, we all knew he would love to stay for the next week or two, anyway. And we weren't sure what to do. It was then that it occurred to me..."Let's all go for a walk by the river" I said to my parents and Lynn. I turned to the young man, and told him we were all going to leave the house, and so dinner was over. "But what about dessert?" he asked. I felt a little guilty. There were pies in the kitchen! He knew it as well as I. He had taken a walk through the kitchen half way through the meal. I almost ran back there. I cut a big slab of pie, and put it between two paper plates, and found a plastic fork. We all piled out into the cold New England afternoon, he with us, reluctantly. As we took off through the woods for the river, he stayed behind, there by the church. It must have been half an hour later we returned, and much to my relief, our dinner guest was gone. But on the steps to the old church building there, I found the evidence of his departure. The pie, untouched, sat on the steps to the church.

No Thanksgiving dinner ever passes my lips without remembering that meal that day. I am still glad we had our surprising guest, Jesus, or Elijah, or just some young man recently de-institutionalized, and no place to call home. And yet to this day I continue to wonder, if I had really taken seriously the proposition that Christ was there in and through his visit: would I have sent him off with pie on a paper plate? It was one of those curious moments of miracle and fear, of hospitality and stinginess, of faith and uncertainty, of wonder and imperfection.

I wish I could say I learned the lessons of that Thanksgiving, and that I would do better today. I am not sure that would be honest! A quarter-century has passed since. I can tell you that over the years I have met Jesus many times. Once just a few years ago, it was when we clothed a half-naked woman, who had had an altercation with the man she has the misfortune to call a boyfriend. Another time it was thanksgiving dinner at our inner city church, where a whole bunch of strangers showed up and became friends. One year it was hundred of winter coats. And yet another, it was a conversation with a young woman recently widowed, who needed a place for a funeral service, for her husband killed by a driver who didn't have the courage to stick

around and admit to what happened. I even remember a year when visiting a refugee camp on the border of Burma when I was given that cool cup of water...in a plastic cup.

We are all still learning how to base our lives on the conviction that Christ is right there, standing with and behind any whom life has tried to break; any left standing on the outside looking in. We still don't know how to do it right, and, yes, sometimes I still wonder whether Jesus might not leave his piece of apple pie on the steps of our house, a sign of thankfulness mixed with pain, grace mixed with sorrow.

The life of an intentional community of faith trying to follow Jesus isn't a clear-cut case of sheep and goats! Wouldn't it be lovely if it was so simple? But Jesus doesn't divvy us so neatly. Christ seems more worried about how we treat each other, and how much love we extend, when the moment of truth comes, and a stranger knocks on the door. Christ seems more interested in love and mercy than our purity of doctrine or our grander abstract moral claims.

There are times we glibly give thanks for the plenty, and other times when it is hard to give thanks because we don't feel like we have enough. Faith invites us to give thanks for things we haven't seen yet, for the promise still to be fulfilled, for the Jesus who is with us when we can't see it. Faith invites us to give thanks in action as fully as in prayer.

Thanksgiving comes to us as much in the dust as in the glory. Thanksgiving comes to us in surprising moments when we least expect to see love or experience hope. Thanksgiving is experienced in the hand grasped; the barrier broken; the humanity restored; or even a glimpse of these. We carry thanksgiving in our hearts for One who is to be found hidden in the shadows, in solidarity with the broken, the stranger on our doorstep.

This Thanksgiving, wherever you gather, bring your wonder and your thankfulness, your uncertainty and all the mystery your soul can bear. And as we today prepare to come forward to the table, to commit once more with money, time and talents to the walk of faith know this: Jesus is not very far away. Where there is need, that's where Jesus is. Where there is suffering, that's where Jesus is. Where there is exclusion and hatred, injustice and fear, that's where Jesus is. Where there is hunger and thirst, that's where Jesus is. Where there hidden suffering and isolation, that's where Jesus is. Where there are hatred and war, that's where Jesus is.

The best we can do, as the friends and followers of Christ, is to be there too. That's what it's about. That's what this body we call Binkley Baptist Church is about, in our better moments. It's what the wider Body of Christ, however much it struggles, however often it falls short, is about at its best.

We give thanks for the privilege of being where Jesus is. We give thanks for the pain and thanks for the power. We walk by faith, we stumble and we crawl and we run and we fly in thanksgiving for the promise. Amen.