

20/20 Hindsight

Ezekiel 34: 17-22 Matthew 25: 31-46

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The Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett, a friend of this congregation when she was the pastor of Saint James Presbyterian Church here in town, and now the president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency in Louisville, is interviewed in the current issue of our denomination's magazine called, "Presbyterians Today." In it she discusses and promotes a new initiative recommended to all PCUSA churches that we become *Matthew 25* congregations, meaning that we will give a new priority and emphasis to outreach and service to neediest of our neighbors, to show we are living out and fleshing out the gospel in practical ways as we find it in *Matthew 25*. Congregations who sign on to becoming part of the *Matthew 25* initiative will focus on one or more of the three focuses of discipleship: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, eradicating systemic poverty.

My observation is that this church and its leaders are already committed to and working toward addressing each of these concerns through our ongoing ministries. But let us never "grow weary in well doing" but rather enhance and strengthen all of our efforts to engage the world around us for Jesus Christ because if we are saved, if we are a part of the elect or chosen of God, then we have been chosen in order to serve others. And in doing so we are serving our Lord. That is the disturbing truth of *Matthew 25*. And today I want us to think about the challenge Jesus is giving to those who would be in his flock of sheep.

In *Matthew 25* Jesus gives us a sobering warning about and preview of the coming day of judgment. You may not want to think about that, but Jesus suggests that we should. In all the churches I have served there has been a myth that has been embraced by many people, a delusion under which they are living. And that myth and delusion is that if they are "saved" they will not have to face judgment, that they will not have to give an accounting of what they have believed and how it has been evidenced in their lives of service to and care for the least, the last and the lost. They continue to believe that because they are Christian they will not have to give an accounting of their own lives as disciples. Scripture teaches just the opposite:

In *2 Corinthians 5:10* we read: "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*" Or again in *Romans 14: 10 and 12*: "*For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God ... So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*"

Consequently, it seems to me that Paul certainly believes that a day of judgment and accountability is coming for each and every one of us. And yes, I know that one of you may remind me of *Romans 8:1* Where Paul also writes: “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.*” So, condemnation no, if one is in Christ and that faith imparts their living, but judgment and accountability yes.

But more importantly than what you or I think, and more importantly than even what Paul thought, is what Jesus thinks so, let’s go to a higher authority. *Matthew 25* reveals that in a graphic and gripping way.

“*If I had only known... If we had only known...*” What sad and regrettable words. How many times in the course of the week do we use those words to either excuse or justify some error of omission or commission in our daily lives? If I had only known sooner what I came to know later, I certainly would have done things differently. It’s why it’s called, *20/20 Hindsight*.

“If I had known your feelings would be hurt, I would certainly have asked you to join us for lunch!”

“If I had known she was attracted to me, I would have asked her out years ago.”

“If I had known that smoking cigarettes could cause cancer, I would never have started smoking.”

“If I had known she was your friend, I would not have said what I did about Alice.”

“If I had known you were coming, I would have baked a cake!”

If I had only known that God saved me so that he could use me, I would have been much more useful over the course of my life. If I had only known that my gifts, my time, my voice, my hands, my help, my money would make a difference in someone’s life, I would have ... what? What would you have done differently?

Would you have been more generous with your money and the resources God entrusted you to manage for his purposes? Would you have tutored a struggling child? Would you have visited that lonely widow down the street? Would you have defended the classmate being bullied? Would you have answered the call for volunteers to teach Sunday School? Would you have said yes to serving in one of the many redemptive and transformational ministries of this church? Would you have stepped up, spoken out, acted differently?

Those are sad words, are they not? “If only we had known...” Well, comes the retort ... why didn’t we know? We had eyes to see and ears to hear. We could have known. We should have known. But too often we see and hear only what we wish to see and hear, or perhaps prefer to see and hear. *Matthew 25* presents us with a very disturbing parable. The Son of Man is seated upon his throne and various people are brought before Him to give an account of how they have lived and loved. We are told that the judge, or the King, begins to separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep are gathered to the right hand for approval and the goats to the left for condemnation. The language of our Lord’s story here brings to mind that other passage we heard

this morning from *Ezekiel 34* where the analogy of separating sheep is used once again. Perhaps this passage is in the mind of our Lord as He teaches.

At any rate, according to our Lord's story, everyone who is judged, whether positively or negatively, seems to be quite surprised. Those who showed compassion and concern for the unfortunate and down trodden, the sheep, are shocked to learn that they have been ministering to the King in disguise. They had no idea whom they were serving at the time and were only trying to meet a need.

By the same token, the goats are startled to learn that in bypassing others they were in actuality bypassing the Son of Man. They stood gawking at each other scratchi9ng their heads and trying to figure out when and where in the world had they seen Jesus hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick, or imprisoned and refused to help him. Surely, they would never have done this. So, they asked: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of you?" And the King will answer: "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 they are sent away into eternal punishment.

I don't like this parable. Do you? It disturbs and judges me. It hits me where it hurts. If you happen to like it, then your eyes and ears must be much better than mine. This parable makes all of us would-be sheep rather nervous. It causes us to wonder how many times the Son of Man may have come among us incognito and found no help or assistance. It makes me wonder how much evil I may have prevented or how much good I may have accomplished, if only I had known who was being served or dismissed when the call for help came.

Of course, it is easy to rationalize or justify our refusal to become involved or to show concern or to contribute our time and energy and money to helping God's people or God's church. These things are in short supply in the lives of all of us, or at least we think they are. And it is very costly to try and help another person. It is also true that no one can do everything, so to exercise compassion over here necessarily means that there will be less opportunity to show compassion over there. But what is more likely the case? Many people simply refused to show any compassion or to offer any constructive help anywhere because they resent the imposition that it makes upon them. Never-the-less, imposition though it may be, if you and I knew that it was Jesus that needed our help, that it was Jesus waiting for our assistance rather than one of the least of them, we would respond quickly and appropriately, I am sure. You see, who we are helping often makes a great difference in whether we are helping.

One day when he was Vice President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson was traveling on horseback through Baltimore. He came to the main hotel intown, dirty and exhausted from the long journey. He dismounted and went in to the hotel to ask for a room. The inn keeper upon seeing him, imagined him just another dirty farmer and not the kind of clientele suitable for his upscale establishment. "We have no room for you here, sir." Jefferson appeared not to hear the man but then when he repeated the request for a room, he was told again that there was no room available.

So, Jefferson departed the establishment and the inn keeper was quickly told that the man who had just left was none other than Thomas Jefferson, Vice President of the United States. The embarrassed and horrified inn keeper, realizing what he had done, sent one of his servants to overtake Jefferson and tell him that he could have the best of everything if he only returned to the hotel. The servant finally caught up with Jefferson at another hotel and gave him the inn keeper's message, to which Jefferson replied, "Tell him that I value his good intentions highly, but if he has no room for a dirty farmer, he shall have none for the Vice President." (Presidential Anecdotes, page 40, by Paul Boller.) That's a far cry from what we see in many so-called public servants today who act entitled.

If the inn keeper had only known, you see, he would have acted differently. The same could be said, no doubt, with respect to another inn keeper in Bethlehem many years ago.

Still imbedded in the cultural memory of most Americans is a tragedy that occurred on April 15, 1912. And no, it has nothing to do with income tax payments! This was the night of the sinking of the Titanic in which almost 1500 people lost their lives. It is a tragic story that has wedged its way into the American psyche as few other tragedies have. People are intrigued by this tragic event. Movies have been made about it, books written, and even a Broadway musical produced called, "*Titanic*."

According to Walter Lord's book, *The Night Lives On*, (1998) this tragedy was made even more tragic when one considers a haunting conversation that was taking place nearby the scene of the accident. As it turns out, there were two ships in the vicinity of where the Titanic went down. Fifty-eight miles away it was a passenger ship, the Carpathia. But only nineteen miles away was a cargo ship, the Californian. The captain of the Carpathia was Arthur Rostron, a man known for his deep piety and faith. Rostron was a man who believed in prayer and turned to it frequently.

On the night of the disaster, when the Titanic distress call came over the telegraph, Arthur Rostron immediately ordered his ship to change course and proceed as rapidly as possible to the scene of the accident, despite the fact that it endangered and imperiled his own ship, given the ice flows in the North Atlantic. It would normally have taken the ship about four hours to travel the fifty-mile distance, but in spite of the ice flows that sank the Titanic, the Carpathia arrived swiftly in three and one-half hours. By the time it arrived, the Titanic had already gone beneath the icy waters but the Carpathia made quick work picking up the remaining survivors, some 866 of them.

However, all the while, the Californian stood a mere nineteen miles away. And from the deck of that ship, two men, an officer named Herbert Stone and an apprentice named James Gibson, watched carefully but seemed to be uncertain as to what their eyes were seeing. They had known that the only other ship in the area was the Titanic, but the ship they saw through the binoculars that evening did not look like the luxury liner. While they watched on that clear night in the North Atlantic, they saw eight rockets go up from the ship. Listen now as I read an excerpt from Lord's book:

Through it all Stone and Gibson talked, puzzled, pondered and sometimes differed over what they were watching. "A ship is not going to fire rockets at sea for nothing," Stone observed, as the two men studied the other vessel. Gibson agreed. Stone added that there must be something the matter with her. Gibson again agreed and said it looked to him like "some sort of distress."

"Have a look at her now, Gibson," Stone said as they continued to watch the strange ship still firing her rockets. "She seems to look queer now."

Gibson looked through his binoculars and said, "She seems to have a big side out of the water." And he commented that the ship seemed to be listing to starboard and the lights on the afterdeck seemed higher than before.

As they watched the strange ship began to disappear, they concluded that the ship was steaming off to the southwest. At 2:20 am, when the lights of the ship disappeared completely, they assumed that she had dropped below the horizon. (The Night Lives On, pages 170-172.)

She wasn't just sinking below the horizon, but also below the surface of the frigid waters. If these two only had known ... If only they had known what they were seeing, how many lives might have been saved that night by this ship that was nearby? How many more of the nearly 1500 casualties might have been saved had the Californian responded? Now don't you suppose that if you were a person who had lost friends or relatives on the Titanic you would want to ask Stone and Gibson: "Why didn't you know? You were trained seaman. You should have known!" But, as I said before, sometimes we don't know what we're seeing when we are staring right at it. Especially if it is something we had rather not see.

The reaction of the two ships on that fateful night of the sinking of the Titanic was not really unlike the response of the sheep and the goats. The Carpathia, like the sheep, saw a need and did what was necessary to respond to it, even at personal risk. The Californian, like the goats, wasn't really sure what it was seeing, decided to wait before it got involved, and ended up doing nothing at the cost of many lives.

In the Presbyterian Church and Reformed theology, we believe that if you are saved, if you are among the elect, then you have been chosen by God both for salvation and for service. The two go hand-in-hand. There are more people worried about their eternal salvation than they are about their service in God's kingdom. However, it's unlikely that you will have one without the other. So, if you are wondering if you are really saved, you might want to examine not just what you believe, but also how that belief is reflected in your living. You may have heard the Gospel. You may have even believed it. But are you living it? Does your life give any evidence of loving and serving God and neighbor? Are you a sheep or a goat?

Now if you are planning when you got to the pearly gates to tell the Lord that you just never knew and therefore you didn't respond to opportunities to serve and to give of yourself in the work of Christ kingdom, you have lost your lone excuse today. The Lord may say, "Well, you should have known. As a matter of fact, were you not in worship at First Pres in Greensboro on June 2, 2019? Yes, you knew and you either responded or you didn't.

Oh yes, I know. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. And most of us could do for others and for Jesus much more than we are currently now doing. And the fact remains that if what we believe is not being reflected in what we are doing then we haven't a clue as to what Christian discipleship and the gospel are all about.

In the name of the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen