

**Our Inheritance: The Least of These**  
**Matthew 25:31-46**  
**April 7, 2019**  
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For the last month, the nation has been pouring through the proposed federal budget for 2020. Progressive Evangelical theologian the Rev. Dr. Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, in his comments late last month about the budget reminds us, as religious leaders have argued for over 2 decades that budgets are moral documents. Given the particular categories of people in need identified in today's text...perhaps a brief review of their treatment might be appropriate.

**The Stranger:** The budget proposes 24 percent cuts in foreign aid, refugee assistance and other programs designed to connect us with people from other lands.

**The Prisoner:** Proposed cuts in the department of Justice and Labor would reduce or eliminate job training programs, including for offenders and ex-offenders.

**The Naked:** There are \$21 Billion in proposed cuts for temporary assistance to needy families

**The Hungry and Thirsty:** The Budget proposes cutting \$220 Billion in food assistance over the next 10 years.

**The Sick:** It is suggested that a combined \$1.15 Trillion in Medicare and Medicaid healthcare spending be eliminated over the next 10 years.

"Just as you did to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done to me. Just as you did not do to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

The least of these:

This has been called by some the Parable of the Last Judgment, it is Jesus' last teaching moment in public. It takes place on late Tuesday or early Wednesday of Holy Week--the last supper and arrest will be less than 48 hours away; his crucifixion is only three mornings away...

It's called a parable because after the opening sentence, the Son of Man somehow transforms into "the king" and because Jesus, who has referred to himself in Matthew as the Son of Man, now uses third-person language to talk about the Son of Man and the King, as though he is not talking about himself at all.

It's also called a parable because it's the way we protestants have dealt with a statement attributed to Jesus that seems to fully support works righteousness, that those who do good get eternal reward and those who don't get to be eternal goats.

So, just what are we to make of this?

The easy thing is to do what I did at the opening of this sermon--to look at what someone else is doing and show how it doesn't add up; to judge someone else as a goat and go back to chewing our cud, contentedly thinking we know which flock is ours.

But did you notice, both the Goats and the Sheep come to the king? Both think they are part of one flock. So how do we know if we are doing enough to become sheep, or miss the mark and become well-intended goats?

Or is that even the question? Because let's be honest...

We, both individually and collectively, ARE engaged in helping the least among us--here, in Evanston, across Chicagoland, in Kentucky and across the globe.

But are there still hungry people? Thirsty people in the world? Are all strangers welcomed, are all who are most vulnerable given clothes and protection? Are all prisoners visited? Are all sick tended to with loving care?

Of course not. I could drag out the statistics locally, nationally and globally and they would all point to the only conclusion that can result if we use this story to judge our actions: we would all be goats for so many who bear the face of Jesus according to this parable are still thirsty, hungry, unwelcomed, naked, untended in sickness, unvisited in prison. If this is about judgement, we are all--ALL of us--goats.

So what if we take another look.

In just 48 hours, Jesus will be in the hands of first the thugs of Caiphas--the church police—and, then in the hands of the Roman guards. Jesus will be utterly helpless, his life no longer his own. And what else?

He will be taken prisoner, and none of the disciples will visit him--not one, indeed; there is no record that any supporter will visit him,

In the very next chapter of Matthew, Jesus will feed the disciples at the Passover supper that becomes the first communion. He will say, as we will shortly say, take eat, this is my body. He will feed them, but, according to the Gospel of John, he will not be fed at all once he is taken prisoner. And, when thirsty, every gospel records he will only be offered bitter vinegar that would never quench his need.

He will grow sick unto death, but only a few will remain near him; the rest will flee.

In just four days, a complete stranger, Joseph of Arimathea, will give his body a place of rest even though Peter, arguably his best friend, will make him a rejected stranger, saying three times of his leader and friend, "I do not know him."

His naked corpse, for they crucified all naked in those days, will be clothed in bandages provided again by Joseph of Arimathea.

Let's see...Prisoner, Hunger, Thirst, Sick, Stranger, Naked.

Jesus says, as you do or do not do to the least of these, so you do or do not do to me. And, he is exactly right. For he will be least of those--the most disgraced, the most rejected, just days from this final teaching.

So if this is actually a parable that predicts his crucifixion and death, what are we supposed to make of it?

Jesus is about to be handed over to a kingdom--a ruler; a regime that will make him all of the things he says call us to compassion and action.

Jesus is establishing that the kingdom of the king of his story is the opposite of the kingdom that is about to arrest and kill him.

Jesus is not the ruler of the kingdom that will put him to death; he is the king for those who know hunger, thirst, nakedness, imprisonment, illness, and outsider status.

What kind of kingdom is he creating with all of these miscreants? A kingdom of compassion and wholeness and justice--the Anti-Rome.

Think about this again from the perspective of those he intends to hear and respond to this message after he is gone.

Those who hunger are poor.

Those who thirst are those who aren't being welcomed at the public wells.

Those who are strangers are those who are not offered bed and meal by kinsman—they are alone.

Those who are naked are shameful.

Those who are sick are unclean.

Those in prison are sinful.

What if Jesus is saying, this is your inheritance; those of you who will follow me, this...these, are your inheritance. The citizens of my kingdom, the least of these, the rejected, the avoided, those unable to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, those who are dependent on others to regain dignity, to find a way forward and how we treat them--how we encounter them--matters deeply to God

We live in a world where in the name of freedom and independence we want to be unfettered. Some in our contemporary American culture see those in need as leeches--part of the nanny state or foreigners beyond our interest and contempt.

They call this desire to have no obligations, to have no responsibility for others, Freedom. And, they are wrong. As Tom Are, pastor of the Village Presbyterian Church in the Kansas City suburb of Prairie Village put it not too long ago in a presentation to the NEXT Church: That state of being unfettered to others is NOT freedom. It's not liberty. It's loneliness.

That kind of isolation where you don't look after me and I don't look after you, that's not independence; that's isolation. And, it's exactly what Jesus came to save us from. Jesus came to save us from lives without compassion, from lives that live by the VERY FIRST SIN of the second generation of humanity in Genesis. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain Asks of the brother whose death he brought about. Scripture spends the next thousand pages answering his question with a resounding YES.

Jesus came so that we might know that we are our brother's keeper and our sister's keeper. He came so that we might see that the greatest one of all--the one who could have claimed divine power and might for himself--instead

became the one who experienced hunger, thirst, imprisonment, sickness, estrangement, and nakedness so that we could see in stark relief what living life by Rome's rules--by earthly kingdom's rules—means.

And, instead choose, another way; a way of compassion, of hope, of justice, of unity with the human family where we encounter Christ in all who are in need.

But let's be careful there. Seeing the face of Christ in the naked, the prisoner, the hungry, Jesus reminds us that the relationship born of that recognition is one of action. You do these things unto me, for me, he says. It's tempting in progressive circles to move from that instruction to a romanticized view of those who fit Jesus' criteria of need. And, surely, we need to see the humanity and the image of God in all. But we must not romanticize hunger, poverty, oppression and imprisonment. We must act to end them if we are to claim our inheritance to fulfill Jesus vision for how the world should encounter him in the least of these.

So, as we prepare to make his final earthly journeys to the cross and tomb and resurrection starting next Sunday, let us decide today to which kingdom are we bound in both of its meanings. Are we tethered to a Kingdom of self-interest and might makes right, or a kingdom of mutual responsibility and caring for least of these as though they are; indeed, because they are our siblings in Christ.

And to which kingdom are we moving toward in the decisions we make and the choices we make about where we put our priorities and our time and our sense of worth?

Which kingdom do we seek--the earthly one concerned with my advancement, my neighborhood, my family, my, my my...  
or the kingdom centered in compassion and hope?

May God guide our choosing and our living into the difficult choices that presents for each of us every day. And, may we, together, be bound for the kingdom of the one who will offer himself once and for all, for all of us, forever.

Amen.