

Sermon (11/26/17, Matthew 25: 31-46):

I know I'm one of the fortunate ones. I have health insurance and prescription insurance and, for the most, can afford the co-pays and other costs that come along. It doesn't, however, make the office visits any easier.

Twice a year I go to the Dentist. For the most part, I do it not because I'm in pain or my teeth are falling out, but as prevention. They scrap and clean my teeth. They make me chomp down on those nasty x-ray film squares that dig into the roof of my mouth. The hygienist always seems to find something that leads to questions like, 'Are you flossing? Here, show me how you do it. Maybe it's your technique.' Not fun.

Recently, I have also had to make a number of other visits to Doctor offices. Not because anything significant was suspected but just to keep an eye on things. 'You are getting older.' Is how my Doctor put it. That was one diagnosis I didn't need to be reminded of.

First, there was a stress test. It took four hours to do and, most upsetting of all, I had to give up caffeine of any kind for 24 hours before it! Then there was the IV, then the stuff that makes your heart glow, then the dreaded treadmill where they insist on making you talk while your huffing and puffing up a hill that goes nowhere. 'You can do it!' The Doctor exclaimed, watching my heart beat faster and faster on the monitor. All ended up being fine, thank goodness, but it was no fun.

Then, a week later, my annual urologist check-up. Don't worry. I'll spare you the details. Suffice it to say, though, that one was especially not fun!

Why did I do all this when I didn't even feel ill? I did it to measure my body's health. I did it to monitor my bodily needs before something became a major issue. I did it because, down deep, I knew it was the healthy and wise thing to do. I wonder, might this be what today's passage is about?

Appropriately so, on this final Sunday of the church year, we listen in on Jesus' final teaching moment with his disciples. Shortly after this, he will be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death.

Jesus' lessons have taken on an air of urgency. They are pointed and

emphatic. They make us squirm a bit even as we scratch our heads trying to figure out what it all means.

‘It’s like ten maidens waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom.’ Jesus explained two Sundays ago.

‘It’s like a Master going on a long trip.’ Jesus said last Sunday.

Each of these parables focused on what the servants and maidens did in the ‘waiting-time’.

Today’s parable is different. There is no waiting time. This is Matthew’s one and only lesson that sets us right smack in the middle of Jesus’ return in all his glory. Some might term it judgement day but, for me, that sounds more like one of those frightening Terminator movies depicting out of control robots hunting down humans.

Initially, the parable does feel like a God’s gonna-get-you lesson. Do this and stay on God’s good side. Do that and you lose your place in the Kingdom. The good will be rewarded. The bad will be eternally damned.

What’s especially frightening about this is that no matter how we try to avoid it, there is a strong part of us that knows this is not a simple separation of the sheep from the goats. Life isn’t so black and white. Our lives are not so black and white. If there is any honest humility in us, we can’t read this story without feeling a twinge of goat recognition.

Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, providing warm clothing to those who are cold, tending to the sick, visiting those in prison.

Yes, I get it. I know full well that these are the right things to do. I try to support the Capital City Rescue mission. I try to do my share in keeping food pantries full. I visit those in the hospital. But how much can one person do? My resources are limited. My time is limited. No matter how hard I try, I miss the mark. There are those whom I don’t feed, care for, visit, and help. ‘Did I just walk past Jesus?’ I often wonder. I can almost hear the sound of a goat bleating only to realize it’s coming from me.

The first thing the great Shepherd does is separate the sheep from the goats. One on the right side and the others on the left. Oh, how I want to be among the sheep when that time comes! Try as I might, though, I have

my mortal limits. My days are often long and hard. I get tired and grouchy. I fail miserably at welcoming the stranger or just about anyone else, for that matter.

Sometimes I see that unfamiliar other and fear gets the best of me. I keep my distance. Did I miss Jesus again? I wonder. Am I a goat? Is there any hope for me? For that matter, is there hope for any of us? Sometimes we baa like sheep. Sometimes we bleat like goats. There is a bit of a sheep and a goat in us all.

There are many religious stories of judgement day, bearing a common theme that the good will get what they have coming to them and so will the not so good. Behave, or else. At first, this parable feels no different leaving us to wonder where all the grace has gone. But then there's this. There's this that makes this passage stand out as different. There's this that causes me to wonder if this is more like a spiritual check-up than a diagnosis. Of course, like most check-ups, it's no fun but it's good, it's healthy, it's wise, and it helps us gage what kind of shape we're in.

'But Jesus,' The sheep say. 'We're confused. When were you hungry and we fed you, when were you a stranger and we welcomed you, when were you in prison and we visited you, when were you sick and we cared for you?'

The Shepherd smiles and says, 'When you did it to the least of those among you, you did it to me.'

Equally surprised and shocked by the Shepherd's accusation, the goats ask, 'Jesus, when were you hungry and we didn't feed you, when were you a stranger and we didn't welcome you, when were you in prison and we didn't visit you, when were you sick and we didn't care for you?'

With sadness the Shepherd says, 'When you didn't do it to the least of those among you, you didn't do it for me.'

When you did it to the least of my people you did it to me. What the sheep did to help the least was not because they were trying to earn points, or secure a place in the great by-and-by, or escape some kind of judgement day tribulation. That stuff didn't even enter their minds. What they did was motivated by a broken heart. They felt deeply, in their own bodies,

the sadness of those victimized by an unjust world and it motivated them to do something. They felt the blight of those who were in trouble and it hurt because when one part of the body hurts, the whole-body hurts. They were so keenly aware of what God's created order was supposed to be like, that when their eyes saw how distorted things had become, it made them angry and spurred them to action. They did what they did because what they saw caused them to hurt, to weep, to feel.

As it turns out, this one and only passage in Matthew's Gospel about Jesus' return, reminds us that the greatest danger we face is when we resist and/or forget how to feel.

As hard as feeling can be. As challenging as it is to empathize with the world's struggles it is also the very thing that makes us most human. We feel because that's what love does. We hurt because we dare to love as God loves us. We give of ourselves to our children, our parents, our families, our friends because there is this hard to explain feeling that binds us to them. We endure, we even push ourselves to the extreme because the love we feel doesn't allow us to give up.

Even so, all too often, we seem to increasingly think that feeling is the enemy.

Opioid use is the leading cause of accidental death in the United States.

The use of alcohol and other drugs to deaden the pain of feeling, is running epidemic in our communities.

We use cold and calculating words like 'It's just business' to avoid the need to feel for those who are left in the damaging wake of our decision making.

We are good at convincing ourselves that those who are hungry, or those who are homeless, or those who are in prison had it coming to them, so it's okay to keep our emotional distance.

Our politics have become so divisively cruel that we deem those who feel for the least among us as weak and naive.

Our fear of the other has deadened our need to feel for the stranger, causing us to constrict our borders to only those who are like us.

Now, to be sure, feeling for the other, having compassion for the

other, empathizing with the other is no picnic. (Take it from a feeler extraordinaire!) The challenging dilemmas it causes are enormous, not the least of which is being able to maintain a healthy balance between caring for the self and caring for the other. It makes life complicated, messy, burdensome, and, yes, even risky. It sometimes even feels like you're swimming upstream. Yet it is what grace demands and this is the measurement today's text asks us to use in determining our spiritual health not only as individuals but as a church, as a society, and as a nation.

To feel is hard but maybe that's the point. Maybe it's supposed to be hard, it's supposed to be confusing, it's supposed to constantly keep us second-guessing ourselves because the moment we stop doing these things is the moment when the goat inside of us takes over, causing us to lose the ability to see that Jesus is not just coming but he is already here, right smack dab in the midst of the least of these.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, you have challenged us this day with visions of your final coming. We pray that we have listened well, not out of fear but for the sake of measuring our well-being. We pray that we have listened well so that the callous bleating that is in us all does not overwhelm the compassionate baa of all that makes life holy and beautiful.

Holy God, for those who are homeless and cold, we pray, even as seek to find ways to provide them with a safe and warm place to live and thrive.

For the hungry and thirsty, we pray, even as we seek to find ways to feed them and give them drink.

For the stranger among us, feeling lonely and unwanted, we pray, even as we seek the courage to extend a welcoming hand.

For the sick and wounded, we pray, even as we seek to be menders and healers.

For our prison system, we pray, even as we seek to be visitors and care givers of those who have lost their way.

For our society, we pray, and for the many ways we seek to deaden our nerves and anesthetize our feelings because of the challenges and dilemmas that such feelings cause.

For our nation, we pray, and for the many systems we create to excuse ourselves from feeling and caring for the injustices these systems cause and the pain it inflicts on the least among us.

This day, O God, we especially hold in our prayers those who weigh heavy on our thoughts, our hearts, and our feelings. Hear these prayers, we ask, be attentive to them and make us equally attentive to them as we now name them in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.