

### Judgment

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46

Just because someone attends a funeral doesn't mean that person professes religion. Just because a minister presides at a funeral doesn't mean that he or she is chiefly concerned with recalling the deceased or consoling the bereaved.

The combination of the conviction that what God wants is for unbelievers to be saved by confessing Christ as Savior, and the opportunity to get at persons not frequently exposing themselves to preaching, means that many funeral services are treated as mini revivals. The deceased is recalled, and some familiar traits remembered, but the great significance of the departed becomes that person's reliance on Jesus Christ, and his or her consequent getting to go to heaven. Those present are reminded, by the preacher, that it is not God's will that any perish, and therefore anyone present who has not already invited Jesus Christ to be his or her personal Savior should do so, before it is too late. They don't always say, "before it is too late," but that's implicit in the context of the funeral, the dead always being beyond the opportunity to agree to what others say they must agree to.

We were at a funeral like that. The preacher alluded to having heard at yet another funeral, by way of comfort to the bereaved, that one didn't have to make a reservation to get into heaven. The preacher said how common that attitude and expectation was, that heaven was the natural destination of the dead, to be in the presence of a loving God. But, he warned, there was no bigger lie ever told. No; the only way to get into heaven was by Jesus Christ, and that meant confessing Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior. People were nodding, not, I think, because they for the first time were being invited to make that decision, and were persuaded they should, but because they'd already made that decision, and were happy to be reminded that it vouchsafed them heaven.

Of course, people also were nodding because everyone likes to feel he or she has got God right. All of us like to hear the things we believe affirmed, and to be invited publicly to assent to the deepest values of our common life.

When one is not reared in that tradition, when it isn't second nature always to regard God's eternal care for one in terms of surrendering oneself to a single, defining declaration, it can seem puzzling. It sounds like one person is coaxing another to agree to something, and once the second person agrees to something that's all there is to it. There's a complication, and the complication comes from identifying the personal decision with a moment of God's grace, based on the belief that faith itself is a gift from God. So, on the one hand, accepting discipleship-- because it's the counterpart of an all-powerful deity's will for one to believe-- indeed is sufficient; once saved, always saved is the motto, almost like the idea that once you learn to ride a bicycle you always will know how to ride a bike. But

the actual riding is the other part-- the actual living out of Christian values, a moral life and an ethical life, a humble servant's life, a life of love, forgiveness, and courage. Does saying one believes lead to all that? Is there a connection between confessing Christ and behaving in a manner which might be described as "Christian?"

That's complicated, too, since the Apostle Paul works so hard to free the new faith of Christianity from the scrupulous rule-following of the Judaism from which Christianity is distinguishing itself. We are saved by faith, not works-- so that the sincere declaration of faith does suffice, and a person's actions don't enter into it.

No preacher will deny that Christlike living is supposed to be part of it. Not a contractual part, because that would undermine the sufficiency of decision, but a natural consequence. If one loves, one behaves a certain way. They'd say being good isn't enough to get into heaven, and saying one accepts Jesus is enough. They certainly expect that declaring for Christ will invite Christ's spirit into a person's life and lead to good actions, but again that isn't taken to be the cause of salvation, only a symptom of it.

See, it's not just those paradoxical doctrines the early church derived from its experience, like Christ being fully human and fully divine, or Father, Son and Holy Spirit being one being which make Christianity tough to sort out. Salvation has its theological problems.

Needing to be conscious of one's Christian identity in order to qualify for heaven is one. The ancient Church baptized in a way we regard as unscriptural. We're right that baptism is presented in Scripture as consequent upon a decision to be formed by Christ. What the ancient Church had, however, was a way to acknowledge God's eternal care for stillborn infants and profoundly mentally challenged individuals. Children dead before a chance to be baptized went to Limbo, which wasn't heaven but wasn't hell, either. It was a neutral space, with no hint of punishment in it. Baptism at the behest of family meant that heaven was possible for the person incapable, in terms of human discernment, of deciding for himself or herself.

So I say it's complicated. People are really invested in the idea that there's only one way to get into heaven and it's the way which makes sense to them, so I don't expect to change any minds, but the New Testament gives room for a number of emphases and conclusions, and this morning's gospel reading is one of several statements from the defining book of Christianity which undermines the common "consciously give yourself to Jesus and be saved message" popular with one brand of Christian witness.

I don't have time to re-read the parable. Jesus presents it as though it were about Judgment Day, and people being accountable before God and being deemed either worthy of reward or punishment. That's good authority for the message.

The message is not about conscious decision for Christ, if by conscious decision for Christ one means saying that you've accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior. If you want to define "decision for Christ" by saying it means you regard others a certain way, you live a

certain way, you embody Jesus' compassionate and charitable instincts and act upon them, then the parable of the sheep and goats would work with that language. However, there are two points the parable takes pains to make. One is that the basis for judgment is not an identity one can claim by saying yes or no to a question like "do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" The parable says nothing about the formal religious stance of the people being judged. They aren't judged on what they, deep in their hearts, feel or decide. They are judged on what they, out in the world of other people, do. They are commended or condemned based on whether or not they have visited the sick and imprisoned or fed the hungry.

That they either justified or condemned themselves by actions, and not by professions of belief, is underlined by the fact that they themselves do not recognize Jesus in the equation. Those who do right ask, "When did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" and those who fail to do right ask "When did we see thee sick or in prison and not visit thee?" Recognition of Christ is not what God requires. Being as concerned about the well being of others as possible, and as usefully engaged in their service, is what matters. What Matthew 25 says is that it is not knowing that you are in Christ which saves you, it is knowing that Christ is in others which saves you.

Of course, both those ways of thinking about what God wants require knowledge of Christ. When we share from the communion table this morning it is as believers, with a heritage of faith. What this morning's gospel reminds us is that this table, like that shared between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags way back when, stands for a faith which invites strangers to celebrate the good bestowed by God, and to have and enjoy what gives life.

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