

Right or Left?

Matthew 25:31-46

Our scripture asks us if we will be found on the right or on the left when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him; when he will sit on the throne of his glory. The question “when did we see you in need? will be answered to both those on right and to those on the left: "When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, members of my family, you did it to me" (v. 40).

Jesus said it: profound, radical words. Every day we walk by half a dozen people, poor people, asking for money. Maybe it is a family—a mother and three children. Maybe a man who says, "I just had surgery and I'm hungry," as he lifts his T-shirt to reveal an ugly surgical scar. "Let me take you to a social service center that will help you." He cursed. "I don't need their help; I need money." Matthew 25 makes us very uncomfortable when we think about it much. We cannot help everyone. We do not have either the money or the time. Besides, who can tell who is really needy and who simply wants a bottle of cheap wine? What can we do?

What we can do and are called to do is to remember what Jesus said: "When you did it to one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me"—not, please notice, just the certifiably hungry and truly deserving. The only criterion he set was "least of these," which means those who are weak and vulnerable, the little ones, particularly the small ones, the children. So what you and I can do and are called to do is not to ignore and overlook, but to look into a human face and to see there the face of Jesus Christ, because that is what he said.

We read with a heavy heart, "I was in prison and you visited me." Not just the community jail where last night's vagrants and drunks are drying out, not just

infamous concentration camps run by evil tyrants, but "prison." What American service people and private contractors working for us did to Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other secret military detention facilities in recent years is not only wrong and incredibly counterproductive, damaging to American credibility and the entire effort to bring democracy and freedom to the Middle East. It not only makes the difficult and dangerous task we have asked precious young American men and women to do for us infinitely more difficult and dangerous. It also offends the one who told us to look for him in the faces of prisoners.

Elaine Pagels says Jesus' words are the basis for a radical new social structure based on the God-given dignity and value of every human being. Human beings are not to be abused and tortured, not because they are wonderful—our guess is that many, if not most, incarcerated people are not. They are not to be abused and humiliated and tortured because Jesus said he is there with them: "What you do to prisoners, you do to me." So in his name we must expect and demand more from our military leaders, our police, and our politicians: accountability and responsibility, careful supervision and high standards of conduct. "Because they do it to us" does not matter. Jesus calls us to something higher and better than that. On Friday night Leroy and I were awakened by loud knocking at our front door. Our son Robert has called the police because he had been a victim of police harassment as he had traveled to the corner service station. Like Robert, none of us was to be victims of harassment, but neither should be the perpetrators. "What you do for and to the least of these—sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned—you do to me," Jesus said.

In these familiar words of Jesus are three profoundly important ideas.

The first is a statement about God. The God of Jesus, the God of the Bible, is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. Jesus said, God is here, in

the messiness and ambiguity of human life. God is here, particularly in our neighbor, the one who needs us. We want to see the face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the children. God asks us to demonstrate the actions of those on the right rather than those on the left!

The second radical statement is about the practice of religion. We cannot read the paper and not be concerned about the role religion plays in the world. Terrible atrocities are committed by people shouting, "God is great." Religious officials hide clergy abuse; deny sacraments to those with whom they disagree. Religious leaders condemn each other, excommunicate each other, invest inordinate amounts of energy and resources fighting one another over who gets in and who is kept out, over whose doctrinal formulas are true and whose are false—over a whole laundry list of issues about which Jesus had absolutely nothing to say.

He did, however, say this: "When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Students of the New Testament know that the only description of the last judgment is in Matthew 25. There is nothing in it about ecclesiastical connections or religious practices. There is not a word in this passage about theology, creeds, orthodoxies. There is only one criterion here, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name; God asks us see him in those in need and demonstrate the actions of those on the right rather than those on the left!

The third most important thing about this subject, however, is not social, political, economic, or religious. It is personal. God wants not only a new world modeled on the values of Jesus. God wants us—each of us. God is not a social engineer but a God of love who wants to save our souls, to use the language of the old revival meetings:

- God wants to save our souls and redeem us and give us the gift of life—true, deep, authentic human life.
- God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love.
- God wants to save us by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us.
- God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, by persuading us to forget about ourselves and worry about others.

That is God's favorite project: to teach you and me the fundamental lesson, the secret, the truth—that to love is to live. **John M. Buchanan**

This scripture is like a spiritual health check-up to let us know whether we need to keep going in the direction we are going or make a change in our lives. Jesus said you will know how you are doing by the way you respond to the needs of other. Jesus said the difference between those on the right and those on the left will be whether we loved others with the love of Christ!

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