

The journey is coming to an end. Jesus is getting ready to enter Jerusalem and is preparing his disciples for a the time to come when Jesus will no longer be physically present to teach them and to lead them. For his last parable, Jesus uses an image that would have been familiar to the disciples. Shepherds in Palestine at the time of Jesus frequently had flocks that were mixed of both sheep and goats. At night, the goats needed to be protected from the cold so the shepherd would separate the goats from the sheep. Jesus tells of a day when he will sit in judgement of all people, and like the shepherd, he will sort the flock.

I was really tempted to skip over the pieces of this text that talk about eternal fire and eternal punishment and get right to the part about taking care of the least of these. We in the progressive church don't talk much about judgment or punishment. I don't really know why that is other than it is a concept that many of us simply to believe in. If God is love as it says in 1 John, and if we are children of God, then how can this loving creator condemn her own children to eternal punishment? I also think we don't talk about judgment and punishment because churches with a more fundamentalist perspective have used the threat of hell to attempt to scare people into becoming good Christians. Many people, including myself, left organized religion, at least for a time, because being told I was going to hell if I didn't follow the right path didn't align with my understanding of God and Jesus.

So what do we do then, when we come across this text? First, I think it is important to know that the Greek word "kolasis," translated here as "punishment," only appears twice in the entire New Testament. The first time it appears is in the scripture reading for this morning. The only other time the word kolasis shows up is in 1 John 4:18 which reads "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." This is a mere 10 verses after John writes that God is love. One might conclude that this idea of an eternal punishment is unique to the writer of Matthew and the theology that he was attempting to teach the hearers of his version of the gospel.

Secondly, the concept of eternal life is one that has been debated as well. The use of the phrase eternal life in text can trip us up if we don't understand that the concept of salvation in the Bible is rarely about an afterlife. When many Christians hear the words eternal life, they think of heaven - some place or experience where life will

continue because they professed a belief in Jesus. But the “eternal life” that the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus point us to is, as Gail O’Day writes “a life lived fully in God’s presence.”<sup>1</sup> Eternal life is not about life after death; it is about a life that fully embraces the love of God for self and others. I previously preached about this and said that an eternal life is not that life never ends but rather it is a life is infused with the Eternal, the divine, the expansive and radical love of our infinite God. If this is one perspective on eternal life, I wonder if the same might be true for eternal punishment. Could the threat of punishment be less about a literal place we call hell and more about the ways we experience “hell” in our current existence? When read metaphorically, the threat of punishment in this parable is not as easily written off as simply a theological concept we might disagree with, and becomes a concept we can actually wrestle with and talk about. We’ll come back to this in a minute. But as always, you are of course, of course, encouraged to make up your own mind about all of this.

Let’s get to the core message of this parable. This lesson is often lifted up as the motivation for charitable works. Jesus says to feed the hungry, so we volunteer at the local soup kitchen or raise money for the food shelf. Jesus says to clothe the naked, so we participate in coat drives and donate our old clothing to Goodwill. Jesus says welcome the stranger, so we wear nametags and pass the peace and proclaim that all are welcome. Jesus says take care of the sick, so we knit prayer shawls, make visits, send cards, and bring meals. Jesus says visit the prisoner, so we support jail ministries. These are all good and worthy efforts. But I think if we read this text and think that it is simply about being charitable, we are missing the larger point. This text not only says we should be doing all of these things, but those on the receiving end are the face of Christ. Upon hearing this, both the sheep and the goats are shocked. The sheep ask, “When did we do these things for you?” and similarly the goats ask “when did we see you in need Lord and not do these things for you?”

As I read these two responses, I hear sadness in both of them. Even in the question coming from the righteous sheep who did all the right things, there is a sadness. They did everything right, but they missed the presence of God in the midst of it. They missed seeing the face of Christ in those they helped. The Rev. Barbara Brown

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<sup>1</sup> Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hylan, *John*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 127.

Taylor elaborates on this idea when she writes "Charity is no substitute for kinship. We are not called to be philanthropists or social workers, but brothers and sisters. We are called into relationship... We are called to look at each other and see Christ who promises to be there when our eyes meet, and in that glance, teach us something we need to know."<sup>2</sup>

I know that this is one of those things that is easier said than done. Being in relationship is messy and complicated. Donating coats or even serving a meal allows us to be helpful and compassionate without getting too close. Being in relationship with "the least of these" can mean getting outside our comfort zone. The Rev. James Liggett expands on some of these uncomfortable truths as he writes the following "...reaching out in love to the presence of Christ in others...is quite often a great big pain. It takes a lot of time, and there's almost never any indication that anything of lasting benefit has happened. What's more, "the least of these" are usually at least partially responsible for whatever problems and needs make them the least. And most of the time they don't look or act or smell the way we imagine Jesus should. Frequently, they aren't very nice, and worse yet, they seldom seem to appreciate whatever good we do try to do for them."<sup>3</sup> But none of this means we should throw up our hands and give up.

This scripture passage poses an important difficult question – How do we approach the way we help the needy? What is our motivation? This time of year, one might wonder if we are trying to get on Santa's "nice" list. When we do things like feed the hungry and donate to charity, are we truly doing it to be helpful or are we trying to feel better about ourselves? Is it an attempt to feel less guilty about our own abundance? Is it because that's simply what "good" people do? Or is it because we see and understand those in need as our own family.

This can show up in very practical and tangible ways. A very well-meaning person at a former church of mine, we'll call her Amy, decided it would be nice to make sockings for the local homeless encampment. These sockings were warm socks stuffed with things like hand warmers, protein bars, and hygiene products. She proposed asking church members to donate travel sized shampoo and conditioner to include in

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1993), 144.

<sup>3</sup> James Liggett, "Reaching Out to the Least of These, Christ the King (A) - 2014," *Sermons That Work* (blog), November 23, 2014, <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/10/29/christ-the-king-a-2014/>.

the stockings. Seems like a good idea right? But she had zero relationship with the people running or living in the camp. Another church member was very involved in the camp and had come to know some of the campers very well. She relayed to Amy that the people in camp really didn't need more shampoo or conditioner. In fact, they had more than they could use as it was an item that was frequently donated and storing all of it was becoming a real problem. When we are not in relationship, our charity can actually be counterproductive.

But more importantly, being in relationship means seeing the other person. Really seeing them. Hearing their stories, listening to their experience, and actively looking for the divine who is present in every one of us. How would our experiences and our presence to those in need change if we expected to see God in them? How might we be better able to love the person on the other side of the soup kitchen counter from us if we are expecting to get a glimpse of Jesus. It is this ability to truly love one another that may be the way we bring the kingdom of God to earth.

Which brings us back to eternal life vs. eternal punishment. In Dostoevsky's book *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zossima ponders the question "What is hell?" He concludes that hell is "the suffering of being unable to love."<sup>4</sup> We see this idea in the scriptures as well such as when John writes in his first epistle, "He who does not love abides in death." We are called to love. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We are called to see each other, really, truly see each other as fellow children of God, as human expressions of the image of God. And we are called to love. When we follow this call in all we do, we will get a glimpse of the eternal love of God right here on earth. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Minneapolis: First Avenue Editions, 2015), 450.