

The journey is coming to an end – our journey through Lent, and Jesus’ journey on Earth. Jesus is getting ready to enter Jerusalem and is preparing his disciples for a 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 but may not be so familiar to most of us. An image of a shepherd and their flock. Shepherds in Palestine at the time of Jesus frequently had flocks that were mixed of both sheep and goats. At night, the goats who lacked the fluffy coats of the sheep, 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 have a love/hate relationship with this text. It would be a much easier text to preach if I skipped 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. Preachers in the progressive church don’t talk much about judgment or punishment. I have some ideas about why we avoid the topic. First, judgment and punishment are theological concepts that many of us simply don’t 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 their own children to eternal punishment? I also think we don’t talk about judgment and punishment because many churches use the threat of hell as the reason people should become Christians. Many people, including myself, left organized religion, at least for a time, because this rhetoric felt manipulative, and it didn’t align with my understanding of God and Jesus.

But what is the text really saying? William Barclay, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University, in Matthew 25:46 “where it is said that the rejected go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life. The Greek word for punishment is *kolasis*, which was not originally an ethical word at all. It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better.”¹ This word is more about correction than punishment. I don’t know anyone who looks at a tree and thinks “That tree is up to no good. I must punish it by trimming its branches.”

The word eternal trips us up in this verse too, especially if we don’t understand that the concept of salvation in the Bible is rarely about an afterlife. Some of you have heard me explain this before. 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.”² Eternal life is not about life after death; it is about a life that fully embraces the love of

¹ <https://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/barclay1.html>

² Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 127.

God for self and others. An eternal life is not a 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. This isn't to say that an afterlife doesn't exist, but simply that the concepts of eternal life and afterlife are not the same thing.

If this is one perspective on eternal life, I wonder if the same might be true for eternal correction. Could the threat of punishment be less about a literal place we call hell and more about the ways the Eternal God gives us correction about our current existence? When one reads this scripture literally, only knowing the English words on the page and our common understanding of those words, this text can be terrifying with its overwhelming pressure to do good or go to hell, or it can turn into something we straight up reject as bad theology written for the explicit purpose of scaring people into good behavior. But when read with this understanding of the words being used and with a lens of metaphor, we can focus on the core of the message, and not get hung up on the fear and anxiety it might provoke in us. As always, you are of course encouraged to make up your own mind about all of this.

This scripture text along with some wonderful spiritual mentors truly transformed the way I interacted with and related to other human beings. I no longer avoided eye contact with the person asking for change on the sidewalk. Living in Berkeley for 4 years unfortunately gave me abundant opportunities to practice seeing Jesus in the face of people experiencing homelessness and a myriad of other issues. This text seems to tell us that Christ isn't interested in whether we recite the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed and believe every statement that it contains. It seems that Christ is much less interested in what we believe and is much more interested in how we live out our faith. Is the focus of our faith on what we believe? Or do we live out the teachings of Jesus by seeking to improve the lives of those who are suffering?

One of the topics our Confirmation Youth learned about was something called SWEDOW – S.W.E.D.O.W. It stands for stuff we don't want. It is a practice that plagues many charities and service organizations. People give away SWEDOW as charity all the time. Maybe they think, rightly or wrongly, that someone else will be able to use the things they don't need any more. Maybe they don't want to feel guilty about having more than others. Maybe they feel bad about throwing away things they never used. Maybe it's with the best of intentions, honestly believing the stuff will be helpful. But just because we have stuff to give away doesn't mean it's something people need. The donor may feel good, but all that may happen is that someone else has to deal with it. One of the things that's important to know as we help others is that it's not about what makes us feel good; it's about what will actually help. That's a little harder to figure out, but if we're really going to make a difference in the world, it's important for us to do the hard work of discovering what will actually change things.

A little over a week ago the confirmation class prepared and served dinner at the Sharing Bread Soup Kitchen. They decided that for dessert, they would make layered pudding cups with crushed Oreos topped with a square of chocolate. We found a case of chocolate pudding in the pantry along with multiple cases of a flavor called Dulce the Leche which is like a caramel flavor, and a few cases of butterscotch. As we were putting together the pudding cups, I noticed that the container of Dulce de Leche pudding I was using had an expiration date of December 2018. Now, I used to work with packaged food, and I know that those dates usually have quite a bit of leeway in them. So, I tasted it and while it wasn't terrible, and I doubt it was harmful, it wasn't great. We decided to not use any of that pudding and switch to vanilla and butterscotch instead.

I wondered aloud why there would be pudding at the soup kitchen that had expired almost 4 months ago. It's possible that the pudding had been sitting in the pantry for a long time and it simply didn't get used. But we also talked again about SWEDO - that people donate expired or close to expired food because they don't want it anymore the idea that "beggars can't be choosers" is still pervasive in our society.

We are called to not just be charitable as followers of Jesus, but to see the Christ in the other person. To really see them as beloved children of God. The one who is hungry, the one who is behind bars, the one who is struggling with a mental health challenge, the one who is sick, the one who is addicted, the one who is grieving, the one who is sitting alone waiting for someone to welcome them. We are called to hear their stories, listening to their experience, and actively looking for the divine who is present in every one of us. How might our willingness to serve those in need change if we expected to see glimpses of 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. We don't do these things because we are afraid of some hellish afterlife. But the ability to truly love one another that may be the way we bring the kingdom of God to earth.

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."³ 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.

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Minneapolis: First Avenue Editions, 2015), 450.