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Where's the Grace?
Sermon for Christ the King Sunday
Matthew 25:31-46
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Sometimes I'll be unwinding in the evening and feel the need for a little escape from reality, so I'll turn on the TV and start flipping through the channels to see what's out there – hopefully a wonderful old movie or something really funny. Sometimes during my search, I'll accidentally catch a glimpse of something highly disturbing, like a violent horror movie or a gory battle scene full of blood and gore or an abused, starving little puppy. As quickly as I can, I change the channel, because things like that are just too hard to watch. At the end of a long day, that's not what I want to see.

In a similar way, the parable Jesus tells about the sheep and the goats and the king who separates them can be hard to hear. Even when we read this in the context of the rest of the Bible, with the assurance that Christ forgives ALL our sins, even the sin of selfishness and ignoring those in need, it's hard. When we hear a phrase like, “Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” our first instinct may well be: change the channel. Flip past that parable to the one about the Prodigal Son. Or change the channel to the 23rd Psalm, where the Lord is my shepherd and he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters and even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil. Or let's go to Romans, where Paul reminds us that neither height, nor depth, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything at all in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I don't know about you, but when I do read a passage like Matthew 25:31-46, I start looking for a loophole. Where's the escape clause? Like, OK, Jesus. I hear you about the

people who are hungry and thirsty and need some clothes. But what if I give them some money to buy those things, and they turn around and use it for drugs? If we give people what they need, won't that just discourage them from getting a job and earning those things themselves? Doesn't that just enable them to keep being dependent on other people?

And what if I visit a sick person and end up getting sick myself? Everybody knows that hospitals are full of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. I could get a lethal infection if I went in there. You wouldn't want me to get sick and die and leave my children without a mother, would you, Jesus?

And what is this whole thing about visiting people in prison? Aren't they in there for a reason? What if I visit a prisoner and they end up being mentally deranged and after they're released they track me down?

Or how about this: I'd be genuinely happy to help anybody in need that I see, but I just don't see anybody, Jesus. When I drive to work, I see cows and horses and a miniature pony and deer and more cows and fields and ponds and homes and cars, and more cows, pretty much all the way until I get downtown. I might see a few rough-looking people as I head west on 8th Street, but I don't know for sure that they actually need anything. There are a couple of Payday Loan places directly facing the back of the church, where I park, but what am I supposed to do? Go hang out in their parking lot with a bag of food and clothes and say, hey, anybody hungry or thirsty or naked over here? Why don't I just put a sign around my neck saying, "Here I Am, Please Take Advantage of Me."

Or how about this: I understand it's important to help people. But what about my needs? I am so busy, Jesus. I barely have time for my own family, let alone strangers, and sick people,

and prisoners. I am drowning in obligations. Other people have far more time and money than I do, Lord. Shouldn't THEY be the ones doing something?

“Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Where's the grace in a parable like this?

Here are several places we might experience grace in this text:

First, we judge each other all the time on just about everything. We judge each other for where we live and how our homes are decorated and how clean they are, how we dress, how we talk, how much we talk, how we smell, the size and shape and firmness of our bodies and what we put into them, how smart or slow we are, how well-behaved our kids are and where they go to college or if they go to college, how prosperous we are, how up to date or out of date we are. We even judge each other on how judgmental we all are (So and so is so judgmental!).

Most of us will probably make at least ten judgments about other people before we get home today. Twenty if you're going out to lunch first. We may not say them out loud, but we will think them. We probably won't even know that we're doing it.

So the first place we find grace in our parable today is in the standard by which Jesus judges. Jesus judges on one thing: Did you see someone in need and do something to help? Not one word about beliefs, how many errors the bulletin has, how many people go to your church, or how communion is served. Acts of compassion towards the weakest members of society. That's IT.

There's so much judgment of people living in poverty. We're so sure that we know what choices they should make. How dare they choose to buy lottery tickets or cigarettes or cable TV. Instead of judging the poor, Christ the King IDENTIFIES himself with them. Isn't that the most

outrageous, fabulous thing you've ever heard? There's no judgment for BEING poor or BEING different or BEING incarcerated. Only for how others treat them. That's GRACE. Especially because we never know when we might become hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or locked up.

Another place of grace: the way Christ's judgment provides a kind of "report card" for us in how we're doing at living out our mission, both as a church and as individuals. We have these four or five different areas that we can look at and ask, how are we doing? How are we doing at seeing hungry people and giving them something to eat, and seeing thirsty people and giving them something to drink? How are we doing at spotting strangers and welcoming them, not just to church, but into our homes? How are we doing at clothing people who might be cold this winter, who don't have the clothing they need to land and keep a decent job? How are we doing at visiting those who are sick or in prison? If these are the things Jesus cares about, then these are questions we need to be asking.

If I were grading our church, I'd say we're really heading in a good direction when it comes to feeding people and giving them something to drink. We've also made great progress in visiting people who are sick, even as we realize there's plenty of room for growth in our caring ministries. Same for welcoming strangers, one of those things that sounds like a no-brainer, but is much harder to put into practice in this age of stranger danger, and suspicion of those who look and sound different than us. As far as taking care of those who don't have the clothing they need, and providing a compassionate presence to those who are incarcerated and their families . . . well, these are yet-to-be-tapped opportunities.

But they ARE opportunities, which is a third message of grace today. Just as we do it or don't do it for the least among us—for foster children, for single moms and dads, for immigrants

and refugees, for people with disabilities, for people behind bars with no hope and no one to care, for people who are homeless and surviving one day at a time—we do it for Jesus.

We get to do something that matters to Jesus. We get to see him. We get to touch him. We look into his eyes whenever we do any one of these things, to the best of our ability, whatever that ability may be. Our lives and choices matter more than we think, and our gifts are greater than we realize. You don't need money or mobility or even your own house to welcome a stranger—you can offer beautiful hospitality simply by the quality of the attention you give to someone.

Much has been said about how divided we are as a nation. Left and right, urban and rural, the 1% and everybody else, there's no need to spell them out, because you've surely heard them all. But when all is said and done, there's only one category that matters, only one whose judgment matters.

I invite you to read the parable of the sheep and the goats as your personal invitation to live a life that really is life, to see Jesus face to face, and to leave the judgment up to God, because God is more than capable of handling that job all by Godself. Let's go where the grace is. Let's go hang out with the sheep.