

“An Island, A Bell, A Goat”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Matthew 25:31-46  
April 7, 2019 - Fifth Sunday in Lent

At one time it was customary in England for the parish church bell to be rung when someone in the community died. That was what metaphysical poet John Donne had in mind when he wrote, in 1624:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe  
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as  
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine  
own were; any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom  
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

After all the weird parables we've heard from Jesus in Matthew's Gospel over these past few weeks, it shouldn't surprise us to find a scene of final judgment tucked in here just before the awfulness begins. In the very next chapter we get Judas's betrayal and the last supper and the arrest and Peter's denial, punctuated not by the ringing of a bell, but by the crowing of a rooster. As Jesus speaks of the nations being gathered before the heavenly throne, we are nearing the moment when Jesus himself will be judged by Pilate, who will sentence him and his followers to weeping and gnashing. And so we hear this word of judgment that resounds through the generations, overruling the sentence of the empire.

Talk about God's judgment is pretty low on the list of topics we focus on from this pulpit and in this congregation. And with good reason — so many of us have experienced the violence that the church finds its way to in the name of God's judgment. And, frankly, if you're looking for a judgment sermon, you can almost certainly find one within a mile radius of anywhere you stand in our state. But in this parable-prophecy, we find the piece of God's judgment that fits with the rest of the story about God.

We find that God does, indeed, care about suffering and about whether we strive to relieve it, or make it worse, or simply try to ignore it. A God who looks for suffering and injustice brings judgment that we know is holy, even if we find ourselves indicted.

Did you notice the double surprise? The ones on the right hand — the sheep — ask, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the ones on the left — the goats — wonder when it was that they failed.

God was always there, it turns out. Jesus has been trying to tell us this since that Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of his ministry in Matthew when he told us that the mourners and the meek and the poor in spirit were blessed. And yet it is a surprise that he was there, with the least, with the needy. He wasn't just with them, he *was* them. The one who sits on the seat of judgment makes his home among the hungry, the thirsty, and the prisoners.

And quickly we scan his words trying to figure out what it is that Jesus wants from us. How are we to be sheep, and not goats? And if we ask that question, we're already toast. Jesus is not giving us a to-do list — *Feed the hungry? Check. Clothe the naked? Check.* Whenever checklists like that pop up, you can always find Jesus around the corner, doing something out of compassion, not obligation.

Christ doesn't want our good intentions or even our hands and feet. He wants our hearts. He wants us to be surprised when we look up from what we're doing and discover that it pleases God. He wants us disoriented and mind-expanded. He wants us wearing a coat to the wedding feast, so transformed by the invitation to live fully in God's grace that prisoner-visiting and stranger-welcoming and thirst-quenching aren't things we do to chase our God. Rather, they are the mundane "this is what we do" of a people who followed the shepherd. Matthew repeatedly asserts that good fruit comes from good trees.<sup>1</sup> Jesus isn't looking for us to try harder. He wants our whole worldview to change.

As he approaches the cross, Jesus asks for nothing for himself. He demands instead that we see that our fates are inextricably tied up in the well-being of every other person in the world. Whenever we see a "them" we can be certain that Christ is among them, on the other side of the river. The border. The wall. No person is an island.

The bell of hunger tolls for thee.  
The bell of thirst tolls for thee.  
The bell of nakedness tolls for thee.  
The bell of sickness tolls for thee.  
The bell of imprisonment tolls for thee.

\*

A brilliant pastor in Chicago who I used to pinch-hit for on occasion while I was in seminary, the Rev. Michael Kirby, pointed out this week that there are parallels between this judgment scene and the last twenty-four hours of Jesus's life that play out in the following chapters.

"I was hungry and you gave me food..."  
Jesus says, "Take, eat; this is my body."

"I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink..."  
"And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him bitter vinegar."

---

<sup>1</sup> Greg Carey at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2209](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2209)

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me...”

“Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!”

“I was naked and you gave me clothing...”

“They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head.”

“I was sick and you took care of me...”

“Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“I was in prison and you visited me.”

“They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.”

Michael wonders if this judgment scene is a vision of humanity unable to get to Easter, a world that is stuck on Good Friday.

I was at a luncheon on Wednesday with some folks who are working across the political aisle and denominational divisions to chip away at the daunting problem of world hunger. Earlier in the week, the Birmingham Interfaith Refugee Ministry continued its work on welcoming the stranger and got involved in the case of a Haitian man seeking asylum who has been detained at the Etowah County Detention Center for two years.

There are signs that Christ is here, and these signs surprise us. This Gospel of Matthew is an invitation not to get busy doing, but to get serious about being an Easter people in a Good Friday world. Over these next two weeks of Church Time we will see that Friday world do its worst. The bell will toll, reverberating with the message that all is lost — that you are alone, on your own, and you’d better watch your own back. And there will be silence, for a bit.

This is not the last peal we hear, however. Bells, dizzying, loud, and beautiful will toll for us again on the third day, joining us in common purpose, in celebration, in transformation as the people of God. Amen.