

To Find the Lost, Heal the Broken, Feed the Hungry  
Matt 25:31-46  
Worship Series Week #2 “The Work of Christmas”  
Rev Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

As we enter yet another week of longest government shut down in history, as Women march and Dr. King’s now all-to-familiar “dream” is mocked by ever-deepening racial divide, as migrants continue to lose their lives on perilous journeys to places who won’t receive them, as people desperate for resources are blown up in horrendous accidents, as children are still separated from parents at our southern border, and as the climate continues to cry out in winter weather that challenges the hardest of us all, we are focusing on the “work of Christmas”, provoked by the Howard Thurman poem of the same name found on the front of your bulletin cover. (and also found here: <http://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/howard-thurman.pdf> ).

It’s difficult to know how to think, what to do in these days of angst and anxiety. While the President of the “United” States and Speaker of the House stand toe to toe but not eye to eye and elected officials greedily take their paychecks, hundreds of thousands of others begin to line up at food banks and make use of giveaways, not because they can but because they must. It’s all too easy to point fingers at one group or another; to exasperate the divisions by injecting our own dis-ease into the mix. And yet to stand outside the fray as if it doesn’t affect us is also disingenuous; it betrays our commitment to community, our common allegiance; whether joined of nationality, creed, inclination or happenstance, we are created to be engaged with one another.

And it is this call to engagement that I hear in this text today. I struggled with this, not because I couldn’t figure out what Jesus is asking of us but because it is so very hard to do. These are familiar words to most of us: at the end of time, at the hour of judgement, Jesus says

people will be separated. Those who have served others will be rewarded and those who have not will face the music for their lack of compassion. It's a passage that engenders self-righteous satisfaction in many do-gooders like us and I suspect, very little fear in the hearts of those who stand on the sidelines. It becomes the ground on which those who argue for salvation by "works" take the high ground and those who rely on faith alone shrink back. But not too far... because in this story Jesus calls out *both* the do-gooders and the sideliners: doing charity for charity's sake earns a reward but misses the point. After cataloging this long list of mission outreach, Jesus tells them they enter eternal glory not for what they did but **who** they did it for...and the do-gooders, those storied sheep, are so surprised they blurt out the all too obvious question, "When did we see **you, Jesus?**"

When did we see **you, Jesus?**" These are the words that blow open the whole story! Here is the Son of Man, as Matthew calls him, rewarding the righteous and the righteous spill the beans when they reveal, in total surprise, the fact that they never, in reality, saw Jesus as all! Sure, they *did* those things. When the Cluster asked for food they collected canned goods, and when someone stood up in church and asked for helpers for the Monday lunch, they volunteered. And when someone needed a cold one, it was "drinks all around," of whatever kind, and when clothes went out of fashion or were outgrown, they were donated. A new person shows up on Sunday morning? A "live one" we hope, and of course, we welcome them! And when friends or family members, even church members and neighbors, were in the hospital, you made the effort to go see them. And even when someone you knew was in prison, you made the effort to connect with him: you sent him cards and letters, money to buy snacks and toiletries, some even when to see him. They/we did *all the right things*... but "Jesus, really now, where were **You?**"

You see, the fact is that I, we, can accomplish this entire list of charitable giving and never have to come face to face with the recipient of our good works. And most of us prefer it that way! I can stand to Redner's tomorrow and collect the food (which is a good thing!) and even drive it to the Cluster building for distribution but I don't have to walk it up the steps of the house of the person will receive it and meet their kids and hear the story of how it came to be this way.

I can write my check, mail in my "good works" and know that responsible organizations will shelter pets, attempt to cure cancers, clean up the environment, build affordable housing. But I don't need to confront the misery, despair, or hopelessness that oppression generates, nor do I get to hear the hopes and aspirations or appreciate the gifts and resources that the hungry and homeless, the unemployed and unpaid offer to us. Jesus pulls the blinders off; Jesus calls it out: when we focus on the "problem", we see little more than ourselves. When we focus on the person, **we see God!**

We see God! In people and places we have been to blind to notice, God dwells. The challenge for most of us comes in believing that is the case, that the homeless guy *is Jesus*, and so is the woman with obvious mental illness and the kid who steals and the old person who smells bad. The struggle is for us to *recognize Jesus* in each and every one of them and to treat them *as if they were him*, to engage them in the fullness of their humanity and to discover the image of God reflected there.

And if we can begin to *see* Jesus' face in the face of the stranger, the immigrant, the person without a home or job; if we can recognize *Jesus* in the person who speaks, acts, lives, loves differently than we do, then we begin to move across the radical divide sharpened by fear and unfounded hatred that has driven the conversation, or lack thereof, in our nation today, into a

*new* territory of kindness and appreciation and grace. If we can resist “othering” one another and see in each the reflection of the Holy, this Word become flesh, then we might dare to open ourselves to a Presence far more powerful and transformative than we could ever conjure on our own. The challenge of this text for folks like us isn’t to start *doing* the “right things”; it isn’t adding new requirements to pass the test. But rather the invitation is to see *in the work* that we already do the *face of the One for whom we do it*: Godself! It is to reverence in another the incarnation of the Holy and to name it as such: **this is where we will see God!**

I showed the children the picture of a little Salvadoran girl; I encountered her one day playing in the dirt at a shrimp farm in a poor, rural area in the Baja Lempa. I didn’t speak to her or her to me; I just watched her wander and run, twist and twirl as children hearing their own internal music might do on a quiet, hot afternoon. She didn’t pay attention to us, American strangers deemed worthy of a cold Fanta sipped in the shade of heat too much for our air-conditioned bodies to bear; she had her own focus, danced to her own song. But it was never so clear to me than in that moment as I watched her that I was looking at God.

You see, after days of walking dusty paths and listening to the stories of indigenous peoples whose lives had been torn apart by US invention in a civil war that decimated the population and disappeared more than 700,000 people; after driving by maquila after maquila, the sweatshops of America’s cheaply produced clothing and hearing the stories of the workers penned up inside; after eating beans and rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner for days on end...I had prayed with desperation that on *this day*, somehow, somewhere, I would see God! “Show me your face!” I pleaded. And that afternoon, there She was: a child who’s name I will never know, playing in the dirt. And as I watched her it I was overwhelmed by a sense, a Spirit that spoke with all clarity to me: this is the answer to your prayer. **This is God.**

And so, this week as I hung her picture on the wall in my new house, she once again spoke to me. Her picture hangs on a wall that is a collage of images that remind me of God's presence and revelation. Each reminds me that God's face is ever changing, God's presence ever being revealed.

Which is why we need to look for it. All our good deeds in and of themselves may earn us points for the great reward but may also obscure the blessing. For the blessing is not given to the one who receives our charity, although if generous they may think so. The blessing is not given for the action of giving, although it is part of our call to share what we have so others may have too. The blessing is in recognizing that it is in the face of the outcast, in the eyes of the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the ostracized that **we will see God.**

"When did we see *you*?" the faithful in Jesus' story asked. "When did *you* last see Jesus?" we might ask each other. In that annoying person in the grocery store or that crying kid in the movie theater? Did you recognize Jesus in the folks smoking on the steps across the street at the apartment building or hanging out on the corner by the liquor store? Did you think, "Hey, there's Jesus!" when you watched politicians on the evening news or saw video of people crossing the southern border? Did you pick Jesus out of the crowd of folks weeping in the aftermath of the latest bombing in Syria or see Him wearing hijab on the bus?

Our call is not to belief but to engagement; not to church but to the world. Christ is found in the places we might least expect him; ask to see God and go into our community and the world fully expecting to meet Him there.

