

“THE LEAST OF THESE...”  
by Rom A. Pegram (3/20/16, Palm Sunday)

Our journey with Jesus picks up today not at the Eastern Gate—though it is Palm Sunday, but after his time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was arrested. Listen to this part of our story for today (Matthew 26:47-50, 55-57)...

And even as Jesus said this, Judas, one of the twelve disciples, arrived with a crowd of men armed with swords and clubs. They had been sent by the leading priests and elders of the people. <sup>48</sup> The traitor, Judas, had given them a prearranged signal: “You will know which one to arrest when I greet him with a kiss.” <sup>49</sup> So Judas came straight to Jesus. “Greetings, Rabbi!” he exclaimed and gave him the kiss. <sup>50</sup> Jesus said, “My friend, go ahead and do what you have come for.” Then the others grabbed Jesus and arrested him. [*Peter cuts off the ear of the servant; Jesus heals it...*]

<sup>55</sup> Then Jesus said to the crowd, “Am I some dangerous revolutionary, that you come with swords and clubs to arrest me? Why didn’t you arrest me in the Temple? I was there teaching every day. <sup>56</sup> But this is all happening to fulfill the words of the prophets as recorded in the Scriptures.” At that point, all the disciples deserted him and fled.

<sup>57</sup> Then the people who had arrested Jesus led him to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of religious law and the elders had gathered. – Matthew 26:47-50, 55-57 (NLT)

Do you all remember the story of *the Good Samaritan*? In that story, the question comes up about ‘who is our neighbor’ and how, as followers of Christ, we should be caring for them. Well, through that now famous story, Jesus clearly showed us who our ‘neighbor’ is ... and *now he’s become one of them—one who needs caring for*. Let me explain. In today’s story, we actually see ‘Jesus, the Prisoner’. **Jesus**, during this part of his journey, **is busy illustrating his teaching from** just a short time earlier in **Matthew 25** ... and it’s that scripture that I want to really dig into today. What did Jesus say about folks who were in the predicament he found himself in—who were in similar dire straits?

Let’s go back to the teaching in Matthew, Chapter 25, which took place on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Here, Jesus tells a string of parables having to do with the Kingdom of God. But the very last section of this chapter is *not* a parable; it’s more of like *haggáda* (a poetic, homiletic passage of the Talmud) than it is parable. It’s Jesus talking about the final judgment and what the Kingdom of God is really all about—the reality... Here it is in Matthew 25:31-46 (NLT), which reads:

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. <sup>34</sup> **“Then the King will say to those on his right,** ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. <sup>36</sup> I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I

was in prison, and you visited me.’<sup>37</sup> “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink?<sup>38</sup> Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing?<sup>39</sup> When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’<sup>40</sup> “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

<sup>41</sup> **“Then the King will turn to those on the left and say,** ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.<sup>42</sup> For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink.<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’<sup>44</sup> “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’

<sup>45</sup> “And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’<sup>46</sup> “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.” – Matthew 25:31-46 (NLT)

Jesus became a prisoner on Good Friday... And, though he’d already taught this to his disciples on the way from Galilee, he was now illustrating his teaching about God’s kingdom ... and I’m just betting some of his disciples are recalling his teaching on the Kingdom of God about now. It’s this teaching that came to *my* mind, as I reviewed our story for today ... where Jesus was arrested, taken prisoner, and carried off to the house of the high priest. Folks, here is our simple lesson for today...

- Jesus became a prisoner in this part of his journey to the cross...
- He’d taught his disciples just a short time earlier this truth: ‘I was in prison, and you visited me.’ Then he said (v. 40), ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

So, how are we treating ‘Jesus the Prisoner’ today? As we treat ‘the least of these’—those who are without food & clothing & a place to lay their heads, so too are we treating ‘Jesus the Prisoner’! *A hard teaching, isn’t it?* But, folks, Jesus doesn’t want us to be ignorant about what’s coming—what we will all one day go through, the Final Judgment. And today, just like those disciples who walked with him on his final journey, we too need to hear his message loud & clear! Here it is...

**JESUS HAD A WORD FOR THOSE ‘ON HIS RIGHT’.** Verses 34-36, once again, tell us:

**“Then the King will say to those on his right,** ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.<sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.<sup>36</sup> I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’”

Let me back up just a moment to the opening lines of this teaching. Verses 31-33 say,

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.”

Folks, isn't it a little hard to tell the difference between the sheep and the goats? I've seen sheep & goats; they look similar in color and size ... at least from a distance! So how is Jesus so certain that he can even separate those who are 'at his right' and those 'at his left'? Let me explain...

Jesus, here in this passage, was most likely talking about *Syrian sheep* (breed). And I've seen this in real life in Israel—though I've yet to get the perfect picture of it. But, Syrian sheep are white; Syrian goats are black ... or mostly black. They could be told apart even at dusk...

So, you see, on Judgment Day, what Jesus is saying to us is that *there'll be no shadow of doubt!* Not only Jesus, but anyone with eyes to see will be able to tell the difference between those who'll line up on Jesus' right ... and those who'll line up on Jesus' left—the sheep (representing those who've been obedient to Jesus' teachings) and the goats (representing those who've been more self-serving in their approach to life), not really giving a second thought to Jesus' agenda...

So, to those clearly identified as sheep Jesus says, “Come!” Don't you just long for the day you hear that word from Jesus? Then he says, “Inherit the Kingdom created for you from the creation of the world!” God's been getting ready for this moment for a long, long time; *the love that has driven Jesus to the cross ... and that will one day stand in judgment of us ... has been there since the beginning of time!* That's a huge love ... that only wants God's very best for us. But are we listening? Then the conversation continues (Vv. 37-40):

“... ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? <sup>39</sup> When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to *one of the least of these* [italics mine] my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’”

There's something that's absolutely amazing to me here; I don't know if you caught it or not, but I want you to see it. The loving people in this story were so humble that it didn't even occur to them that their daily kindnesses to others could ever have been a personal service to the King (Jesus), or that they'd done anything worthy of reward. Isn't that amazing? That's who Jesus is looking for when he lines 'em up on his right. So, how are we treating 'Jesus, the Prisoner' today (if indeed how we treat others is actually how we are treating him)? Are we...

- Feeding Jesus when he's hungry?
- Showing hospitality to Jesus, as if a stranger—new to our community?

- Helping clothe Jesus, when he needs clothes?
- Caring for Jesus, when he's sick or incarcerated?

It'd be great—for many—if the story ended here, wouldn't it? But it doesn't. So then...

**JESUS HAD A WORD FOR THOSE 'ON HIS LEFT'**. Verses 41-43 read:

**“Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.”**

Do you know the #1 lesson I learn from this part of Jesus' teaching? IT DOES MATTER WHAT WE DO WITH OUR LIVES! And, according to Jesus, *it will matter eternally!* And this judgment identifies 'sins of omission' as very serious. *All one needs to do to miss out on God's grace ... is to ignore him ... and his teachings!* And this reminds me of the old saying (and I'm sure you've heard it before): “All that needs to happen for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing” (paraphrase of quote by Edmund Burke...)!

There was a pastor who spent a sabbatical in Basel, Switzerland one time and, while there, he visited St. Martin's Church. He was very impressed by the sculpture on the front wall depicting Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who had converted to Christianity. And the story behind this sculpture was this: One cold winter day, entering a city, Martin was stopped by a beggar asking for alms. Having no money, Martin took off his coat (cloak), cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream of heaven, and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's coat (cloak). An angel asked Jesus, “Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak?” And Jesus answered, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

Folks, IT DOES MATTER WHAT WE DO WITH OUR LIVES! And today, in many parts of the world, the Christian Church is seeking to meet human need 'in the name of Christ'. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew (which we're in today), Jesus' ministry always balanced time for 'random acts of kindness' with time given to the teaching of God's word; *we are called, as Christ's church, to interface deed and word in our mission.* [Love God, Love People, Serve God by Serving Others] And *this is at least one reason Jesus became a prisoner on Good Friday*—becoming an illustration in Matthew, Chapter 26, of what he taught his disciples about the Kingdom of God in Matthew, Chapter 25! Jesus actually became 'one of those' marginalized people he taught about—specifically a prisoner...

So, as we conclude today, ask yourself this: Which category do you fall into today? **Are you amongst the sheep—those lining up on Jesus' right? Or are you amongst the goats—those lining up on Jesus' left?** It's really not that hard to tell; and it really won't be that hard for the Great Shepherd to tell...

Now, don't look at me like I'm ridiculous today—like I should already know the answer (“Of course I'm a sheep! I go to church, don't I?”). Folks, you could sit in a pew your whole life and still be a goat. How could that happen? We all have a free choice in this; the decision is up to us. It's God's gift of free will. But the final judgment, as Jesus describes it here, will tell the tale...

I'll tell you one thing for sure: Jesus didn't allow himself to become a prisoner ... and to be carried off to the cross ... so that we could line up on his left! Jesus did what he did so we'd have the opportunity to line up on his right...

The immediate questions for us today are these: Is our heart lined up with Jesus' heart? Is his agenda our agenda ... or are we still trying to run our lives by ourselves? Will we be about Jesus' business, as individuals and as a church, and ... or will we not? The choice is ours...