

The First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
Sunday, March 18, 2012
Roland P. Perdue, III, Interim Pastor

RADICAL* GOSPEL

Matthew 25:31-46

November 21, 2010

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’”

St. Matthews 25:40

*radical (rad’ i kel), adj. 1. of or pertaining to the root or origin; fundamental...

“You were speaking of the Last Judgment. Allow me to laugh respectfully,” says one of Camus’ characters in his novel *The Fall*. And even if we do not quite join in the laughter, not very many lose too much sleep worrying about the Last Judgment. At least, not anymore, for things are bad enough on this side of eternity.

For some of us, Judgment Day is a product of a pre-scientific world-view of a past age. For others, it is an element of the far-distant future; something to contemplate along with the death of that star we call our sun millions of years from now; literally the “end of the world,” as we know it. But the Last Judgment is not something to fret about right now. And it is apparent from our personal and public or corporate behavior that not many take the Last Judgment seriously. “You were speaking of the Last Judgment. Allow me to laugh respectfully.” Many of us find ourselves reflected in that statement.

“You were speaking of the Last Judgment. Allow me to laugh *respectfully*.” And we place the emphasis on the word *respectfully*. Just in case, you know. When honest with ourselves, we realize we are left at least a bit uneasy by the implications of Jesus’ description of the criteria for judgment – “As you did it, or did not do it, unto others, you did or did not do it unto me.” What if we really *are* judged on the basis of our behavior to others? So if we laugh at all, we do so *respectfully*.

However, I want to place the emphasis on the word *laugh*. I want us to laugh right out loud at the fear and dread generated by this scene of the sheep and the goats. Any other response is not only inappropriate but wasteful. “You were speaking of the Last Judgment. Allow me to *laugh* respectfully.” In Matthew’s scene of the Last Judgment there are a number of little surprises which wonderfully change dread into delight and fear into faith.

The first surprise is that the future is already impacting our present moments. There is nothing to wait for; it’s happening right now and right here. The “not-yet” of God’s future is at work in our present as an active and dynamic force pulling and pushing us, inviting and restraining us.. Remember when this was written. The Gospel of Grace had been proclaimed by Paul for decades before Matthew was written. When Matthew writes, the church for which he wrote had already been in existence for years. They lived in grace; they knew God loved them.

They knew that they had been made whole by God's gifts of faith and grace. And while, in St. Paul's terminology, they were "working out their salvation in fear and trembling," they also knew so-called "good works" were a response to grace, not a requirement *before* one received grace. Gracious behavior and mission always follow a reception of grace from Christ our Lord. We do this because he loves us and frees us from ourselves gradually. Through the church of St. Matthews's day, Jesus has given us a picture of what human life is meant to be; he has flashed before the eyes of his people a scene of what humankind is intended to become. "The present is not what it ought to be; it is in motion, and can even be changed into something quite other" (Carl E. Braaten, *Christ and the Counter-Christ*, pg. 16).

Jesus is saying the righteous are involved and engaged in the struggle against the forces and powers of this world which dehumanize and depersonalize. They are those who have shown acts of simple and random kindness and thoughtfulness to others; especially to the so-called "insignificant others," or the "least of these." Or as John Calvin might have put it, "in not caring for others, we murder the image of God within them."

This basic, fundamental and radical Gospel is about God's surprising future and our participation in it. God graciously allows us to share in the shaping of the kingdom. The future is not some place we are merely going to inevitably; it is some place we are creating right now. We create the future by sending aid and expertise to places like Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq, and by caring for those within our spheres of influence. We create the future of God's purposes when we give a child a decent meal, a home of love and affection, an education equipping the child to live in God's presence as a participant in freedom.

A simple but not simplistic way to the future is expressed by Shel Silverstein in his delightful book *Where the Sidewalk Ends*:

I will not play at tug o' war.
I'd rather play at hug o' war,
Where everybody hugs
Instead of tugs,
Where everybody giggles
And rolls on the rug,
Where everybody kisses,
And everybody grins,
And everybody cuddles,
And everybody wins.

And so we "laugh" because we want to become people in that kind of a world now; a world in which the cup of water, the piece of bread, the visit, the bit of clothing, the welcome to the stranger are functioning qualities of our humanity. They are not "special" or unusual things we do, but normal and natural behavior.

The second delightful surprise is all the various other connections running through this scene. Not only is the future connected to the present, but the material is connected to the

spiritual, we are connected to each other, and all mankind is connected to the Christ who holds us all together!

The spiritual and the material are always connected. The questions our Lord asks us are not, “Did you give him spiritual nourishment?” but “Did you give him a cup of water?” They are not “Did you give her peace of mind?” but “Did you give her a piece of bread?” And what at first appears to be an emphasis on the material is a wonderful connection of the spiritual and the material. For in Biblical thought, the spiritual is very often, if not always, found within the material. The infinite is discovered and revealed within the finite. The transcendent is incarnated and becomes material- “the word made flesh among us.”

At our best, we know this. And musicians like Bruce Springsteen capture it in song. In his new album, *Wrecking Ball*, he sings in tribute to the blue-collar working persons largely being forgotten in today’s turbulent economy and so far in the presidential rundown or runaway.

I’LL MOW YOUR LAWN,
CLEAN THE LEAVES OUT’ YOUR DRAIN
I’LL MEND YOUR ROOF, TO KEEP OUT THE RAIN
I TAKE THE WORK THAT GOD PROVIDES
I’M A JACK OF ALL TRADES,
HONEY WE’LL BE ALL RIGHT

I’LL HAMMER THE NAILS, I’LL SET THE STONE
I’LL HARVEST YOUR CROPS,
WHEN THEY’RE RIPE AND GROWN
I’LL PULL THAT ENGINE APART,
AND PATCH’ER UP ‘TILL SHE’S RUNNING RIGHT
I’M A JACK OF ALL TRADES, WE’LL BE ALRIGHT

THE HURRICANE BLOWS, BRINGS THE HARD RAIN
WHEN THE BLUE SKY BREAKS
IT FEELS LIKE THE WORLD’S GONNA CHANGE
AND WE’LL START CARING FOR EACH OTHER
LIKE JESUS SAID WE MIGHT
I’M A JACK OF ALL TRADES, WE’LL BE ALL RIGHT.

If we are of Christ, we will find ways, adequate and realistic ways, to care for each other “like Jesus said we might.” For our caring for each other is a result of knowing that Jesus cares for us. If we love others at all, feel any kinship with others, it is because Christ first loved us.

At least, we will not be going around saying, “Jesus loves you,” and leaving people uncared for, hungry and naked and not welcomed. For we will, as Springsteen sings, “care for each other as Jesus said we might” in the future we are creating with our Lord. It is all connected in Christ.

Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* has a scene which surprises us delightfully. Billy Pilgrim read a book entitled *The Gospel from Outer Space*. It is about a man from outer space

who has come to earth to discover why Christians find it so easy to be cruel. He decided that it has to do with the fact that we are cruel to those who do not have good connections, those who are of no apparent worth to us. So the visitor from outer space gives to the earth a new Gospel:

In it, Jesus really *was* a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had... So the people amused themselves one day by nailing him to a cross in the ground. There couldn't possibly be any repercussions, the lynchers thought... And then, just before the nobody died, the heavens opened up, and there was thunder and lightning. The voice of God came crashing down. He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son, giving him full powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity. God said this: *From this moment on He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who had no connections!*

For "inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these – to these who have no connections – you did it unto me."

And if that sounds any different from the Gospel we have, it is only because we have not understood the Gospel we have!

Amen