

THE CRITICAL CRITERION¹
Matthew 25: 31-46
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
November 23, 2008

We come to this last Sunday in the liturgical year hardly aware that it concludes a year in the church calendar that began last year on December 2, the first Sunday of Advent. That's not anything to be ashamed of in our tradition. Baptists have never paid all that much attention to the traditional liturgical calendar, except for Christmas and Easter. This last Sunday of the liturgical year, called Christ the King Sunday, is not a major event on our calendars!

But it is worth pausing to think that the traditional church year begins with Jesus as a baby and ends with Jesus as a king and a judge — not a popular image of Jesus today, when we much prefer Jesus the buddy, Jesus the friend, Jesus the healer, Jesus the savior. Here is Jesus the judge, preparing to evaluate everything that has happened since the dawn of time.

I

This comes just before we start over with the Advent stories, the waiting and the expectation and the hope in a time of darkness. Before we

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start over with Christ the baby, however, here is Christ the victorious king, judging the world.

It's a sobering thought, isn't it? When you cut through all the apocalyptic imagery of this parable that is peculiar to that time and age, images such as sheep and goats, the devil and his angels, eternal fire and punishment, all of that — you still get the reality of a judgment. Jesus the judge of the world! In our world of nonjudgmental, "my conscience is my guide" morality, this parable comes to us as a jolt. Clear away all the apocalyptic paraphernalia, and what you get is something very simple: the idea that one day the whole world will be judged.

And notice that the image is that *nations* will be judged (v. 31). Nations! That's a frightful thought! Nations? We are so used to an individualistic religion, the idea that we will make a personal account before God at the end of time, that it stretches our imagination to think of a nation standing before Christ at the end of time to be judged. But that is precisely the image we get here in this parable, and it's enough to keep you awake at night.

The thought that large groups of people, organized into political entities, governed by elected officials and guided by laws interpreted by a court system, will one day be judged as a political entity, is so foreign to our

religious thinking that it comes as a shock. But here it is, in a parable of Jesus spoken just hours before he will face his own death. If nothing else, Jesus had a way of getting their attention, and with this one he hit a home run!

II

It's just like Jesus to simplify our ethics. He had a way of cutting through all the legalisms, all the arguments, all the complexities of interpretation, all the intricate networks of excuses and complications and predicaments, the maze of explanations about incarceration without charges, torture that is not called torture, and violence excused by appeal to national security, and he brought it down to one simple question: Did you help people? Now wait! Don't go back to personal benevolence! This is judgment based on national policy! Did you help people? Did your national political leaders, your laws, your courts, your structures of society, help people? If you are in a democratic society, did your people vote to help people? Did they support candidates that committed to help?

The test Jesus gave in this parable of judgment is not based on a complex definition of need. He made it simple:

*...for I was hungry, and you gave me food,
I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,*

*I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.*²

The judgment of a nation, in other words, will not be based on the knowledge it has amassed, the power of its military, the influence of its economy, or the sophistication of its arts. It is not based on whether a nation is a democracy, a socialist society, a constitutional monarchy or a dictatorship. There is no mention of a faith test: not one word about believing in Jesus, following the ten commandments, or even if a nation is religious. There is no word here about church attendance or religious practices of any kind!

This parable cuts it down to the one question every nation must ultimately answer: how did you react to human need? This is not about flipping a quarter toward a person on the street corner who has no shelter; this is about supporting national policies that effectively eradicate the shame of families losing their shelter in this most sophisticated land in the world. This is not about buying a turkey for a less fortunate family at Thanksgiving; this is about influencing the turkeys in Washington who block collaboration to do something about the shame of persistent poverty and real hunger in this land of plenty!

² Matthew 25: 35-36.

No wonder we ignore this parable! It is easier to emphasize private morality while we let national policies go their own way. Yes, the poor will always be with us, as Jesus once said, but the poor need not be ignored and marginalized and made to feel guilty for being poor. There is a gentleness about this critical criterion, a caring about this critical criterion, a compassion about this critical criterion, that transcends political parties and ideological positions. Any nation, any political party, any administration, any government (local or national), has the capacity to reach out to the least of these: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the cold, the sick, the prisoner.

III

There is one more surprising aspect of this parable that I want to point out. There is an unusual emphasis on the ability to see. *Lord, when was it that we **saw** you hungry...or thirsty? And when was it that we **saw** you a stranger...or naked? And when was it that we **saw** you sick or in prison and visited you?* There is an extraordinary emphasis on seeing!

That is to say, the limit of our judgment is based on the limit of our seeing the need. At no time in history have we had greater capacity to see and understand the root causes of the needs around us. We have the technology to know the needs of people and to implement strategies to

meet those needs as never before! We have satellites scanning the earth looking for weapons of mass destruction, and they fail to interpret the obvious: by far the greatest weapon of mass destruction on earth is persistent, grinding, humiliating, hunger and thirst and sickness and limited educational opportunities in a world of plenty. There is no greater terrorism on earth than the terrorism of watching your child die of hunger. That kind of terrorism is the fertile seedbed for the other kind of terrorism that breeds the evil of indiscriminate suicide bombers.

Any war against terrorism will be endless unless the nations of the world wage war on the plague of poverty and disease and despair. There is not a soul here who does not respect the incredible bravery and sacrifice of those in the military. There is not a soul here who does not pray for those in the military. But when judgment day comes, as this parable promises, and nations are brought before the judgment seat of God, that judgment will not be based on the might of a nation's military force. It will not be based on a nation's ability to force a regime change or to win a war against terrorism.

That judgment will be based on how we responded to the elementary human needs of hunger and thirst and loneliness and need found in ordinary human beings whom we can see.

IV

The surprise ending of this parable, of course, is that when a nation treats people with this kind of gentle compassion, that nation is treating Christ with compassion. And when a nation withholds such help, it is withheld from Christ himself.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, when we think of national need, let us consider national judgment. Let us remember with genuine gratitude the sons and daughters of this nation who are in the military, many of whom find themselves far from home this Thanksgiving and in dangerous places. No one fails to be grateful for their sacrifice.

And on this Thanksgiving, let us remember the critical criterion of judgment for any nation: *...just as you did it to one of the least of these ...you did it to me.*