The Real Surprise of Matthew 25

Co-missioners,

We assume that even in these days of Covid 19 many of you are managing to check in at church on Sunday, if not in person then via the internet. And some of you are among the pastors tasked with making church-of-sorts happen on Sundays. In either case you're noticing that Christ is dosing us once again with the three great parables of Matthew 25, first the bridesmaids and their lamps, then the slaves and their talents, and finally the great capstone vision of the sheep and the goats.

So expect a lot of butchery from pulpits this month, Lutheran ones included. It happens like clockwork every three years when we reach the end of the lectionary's Matthean cycle. Butchery is a preacher so mangling the word of Christ that they fail to pump good news into the ears and hearts of the people they're talking to and leave them squirming instead. That's all too easy to do when you're grappling with passages that end with shut doors and outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth, and "whatever you did (or didn't do) to the least of these…you did (or didn't) to me."

With this in mind we treat you today to a rerun of a Thursday Theology post that first appeared at the end of November 2014. Regrettably, it came out too late to mitigate the messes that were surely made of Matthew that year too. We hope it will help, if only a wee bit, to stave off the damage in 2020.

Remember that we call it *the Gospel* according to St. Matthew. It really is. Read on.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

“Sheep? Goat? Try ‘Member of the Family.’” The Real Surprise of Matthew 25.

By Jerome Burce

With time a-wasting I’m going to condense an imagined longer, better-written piece into a page or two of loosely linked thoughts, thrown together as preparation for the hearing that

all of us will be doing this Sunday if we show up in a church that follows the Revised Common Lectionary. The dominant text will be the third and final image in Matthew 25, of the Son of Man come in judgment to separate the sheep from the goats.

Some observations:

1. As with any Sunday morning text, the temptation will be strong to read Matt. 25:31-46 as a stand-alone passage, without reference to its context, whether immediate or document-wide. Resist that temptation. If it helps, yell, "Get behind me, Satan."

2. After all, the stand-alone reading is the devil's kind of reading. It yields results that are bound to fail the double-dipstick test of genuine Gospel. It doesn't comfort consciences, but burdens them. It doesn't glorify Christ. Instead we're left to cringe and bristle at the thought of Christ.

3. Thus the comment of one in the little knot of thirty-something men who read this through with me last night. "I'm on the spot," he says. "I've got to produce, but I don't know how high the bar is set. How many sick beds must I visit, how many bellies do I fill, to wind up counted with the sheep?"

4. Or as another said, "It pretty much negates everything we've been talking about these past few months [in our tour through Galatians]. According to this [i.e. Matt. 25, stand-alone reading], Christ himself is telling us that it's all about our works. Faith is beside the point."

5. "Yes!" says Satan.

6. “No!” says the person who, paying attention to the wider framework the passage is nestled in, begins with the observation that Matthew’s Gospel abounds in absurdly good news. “Blessed are the poor in spirit / the mourners / the meek” (5:3-5). And that’s just for starters.

7. Go now to the heart of the Gospel, at its structural center, in the third of five clearly demarcated “discourses,” two preceding, two following: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which a man found and hid; then in his joy he sells everything he has and buys that field” (13:44). There is but one way to read this that finally makes sense. It describes the God who, in Christ, divests himself of all that he has, to own the treasure he finds in shabby, broken sinners, of whom Matthew himself is a prime example, as are his tax-collecting colleagues (9:9-13).

8. Note the tagline at the end of the episode mentioned above: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (9:13). Here Jesus is describing his own behavior as dispenser-in-chief of mercy, the “Son of Man” with “authority on earth to forgive sins” (9:6). Of the essence: this is the same “Son of Man” who shows up “in his glory” in this Sunday’s passage (25:31). So, going in, we should expect to witness a glorious dispensing of mercy, not a totting up of sacrificial offerings.

9. Key to this project of dispensing mercy are Jesus’ disciples. Pay particular attention to the circumstances of their formal appointment, in direct response to Jesus’ gut-wrenching “compassion” for the milling crowds, “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:35–10:4). Out of that arises their remarkable calling

as agents of Jesus' mission, the specifications of which are laid out in the discourses of Chapters 10 and 18. These serve as boot camp and basic instruction for the great mission assignment of 28:19.

10. Two lessons lie at the heart of this missionary instruction. a) God is absolutely dependable. He's behind his workers, and has them covered. "So have no fear" (10:29-31). b) God is generous beyond imagining. Thus the story of the servant whose debt of $2.5 billion (at least) is written off in another spasm of compassion (18:23-27).

11. Thus too the story of the workers in the vineyard (20:1ff), which is told in response to Peter's attempt to tether future reward to his own labor and sacrifice as a discipled missionary (19:27). "Not so fast," says Jesus. "I won't let you down (19:28-29), but understand that pay for kingdom work is predicated not on output or time served, but strictly on God's rule-defying kindness and generosity" (20:13-15).

12. Note again the emphasis on generosity—huge, undeserved, welling up from God's inner depths. This is one of Matthew's most important and striking themes. It glimmers at the beginning (foreigners drawn to the joy of Christ, Chapter 2, v. 10 in particular) and persists till the end (disciples commissioned in spite of their doubts, 28:17ff.). According to Matthew, it's what Gospel is about. By the time we get to Chapter 25 he'll have beat the drum about it so often that we're obliged to look for it, expecting that if it's not there patently, it nonetheless serves as the underlying presupposition of everything Jesus will say.

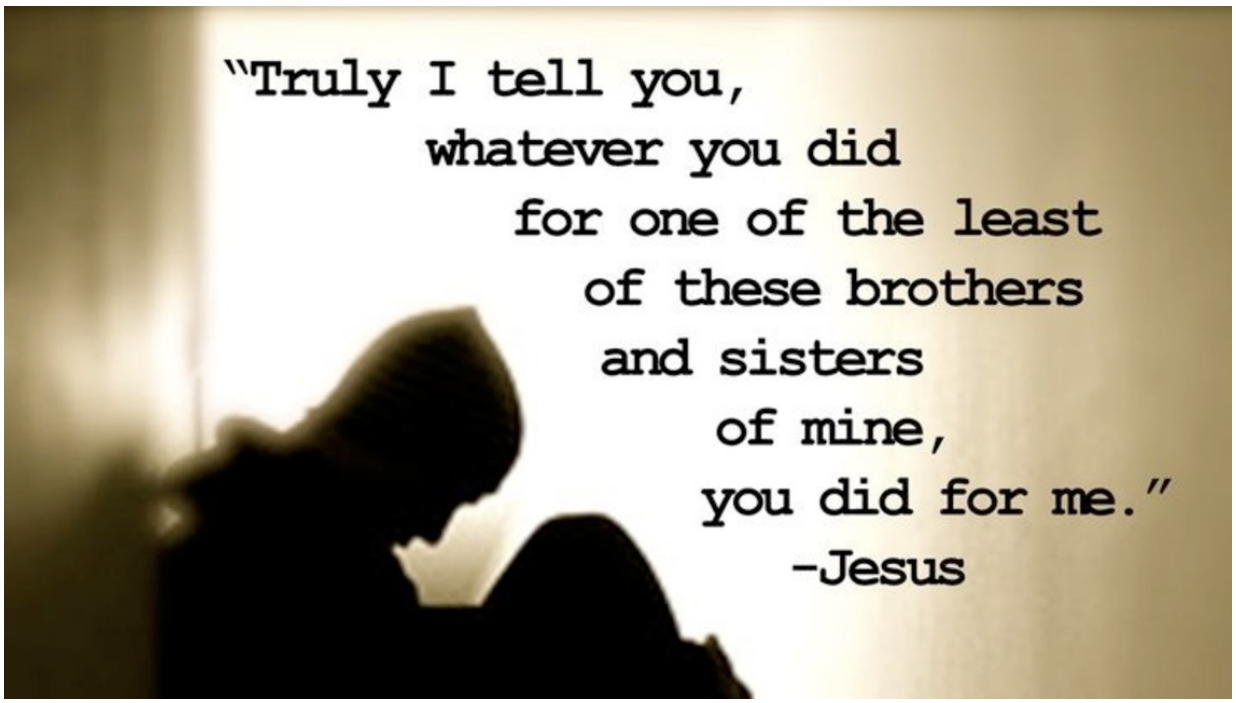
13. Fast forward, then, to 24:3, which opens the discourse that the sheep-and-goats passage will conclude. “When [Jesus] was sitting on the *Mount* of Olives, the disciples came to him privately….” So this is Sermon on the Mount II. Don’t be surprised when you catch persistent echoes of Sermon on the Mount I (Chapters 5-7). Key message of SM I? “God is your *Father*. Imagine that. Better still, trust it. Act on it.” The one who reads SM II with that in mind will be the wise reader, who builds on rock (cf. 7:24).

14. A second thing to note as we plunge into SM II: this is Jesus talking in private with his disciples, i.e., and crucially, his missionary interns. They know something about him. They’ve been learning to trust him, though there’s tons of learning still to do. They’re about to see him swallowed up in the darkness of the Passion. Ergo the essential message, about to be delivered, and tailored *specifically* for them, with earlier themes repeated: “I’m counting on you, absurdly, with a generosity of trust and commitment that defies imagination. As for you, count on me. I’ve got your back. Come what may—a lot of it won’t be pretty—trust, trust, trust! And with that, away you go. To the nations, *ta ethne*, with whom God intends, in me and through me, to be as generous as he already is with you.”

15. Parenthetically, about *ta ethne*: this too is one of Matthew’s key themes, the mission to the nations, the others, the outsiders. Gentiles, if you must. It’s everywhere in Matthew, beginning, middle, and end. Why interpreters commonly miss it and describe Matthew instead as in-house moral instruction for a beleaguered Jewish Christian community, I can’t begin to say.

16. So with all this in mind, let’s look again at the three great stories of Matthew 25, not forgetting that there’s logical and narrative spillover from 24 to 25 that demands checking out. (I leave this to you.)

17. First, the virgins (25:1-13). Read in context, here’s how I parse it: “Boys, you’re headed not for hell, but for the Best Party Ever. Imagine that—you and the likes of you, not merely the invited guests but the extra-special guests, with a place assigned for you already at the head table, rubbing elbows with groom-and-bride. Is that good news, or what? Now don’t forget it. Night may fall, and it will. I’ll likely show up late. You can pretty much count on that. That said, don’t make the fatal error of giving up on me. Don’t join the crowd that thinks the Party is a pipedream and takes grinding teeth and outer darkness for granted, as our necessary human fate. You’ll find that theory everywhere when you hit the road and meet *ta ethne*. Don’t be sucked in by what you hear. Instead, let your light shine!”



18. Next, the talents (25:14-30). “Boys, don’t sell yourselves short, and still less, don’t sell me short. Look what I’m entrusting you with in these days or years or millennia of waiting. Ten talents here, five there, one over there. One talent is fifteen years’ worth of a bottom-rung worker’s minimum daily wage. Do the math: 8 bucks an hour, 12 hours per day, 6 days per week, 50 weeks per year (2 weeks off for R&R), and all that times 15. It amounts to $432,000, not exactly chump change, and even that is nothing more than the feeblest hint of the massive treasure I’m putting in your hands. Yes, you can handle it. Why else would I entrust you with it? So off you go on that road to the nations, and once you get there, spend, spend, spend, investing in them as I’ve invested in you. It’s your turn to risk. Don’t think for a moment to bury the treasure, i.e. to conceal the reality of God’s forgiveness, stupendous in its breadth and depth and absurd generosity. Don’t let me hear that you kicked a Canaanite woman in the teeth, or a blind beggar, for that matter, because you thought they’d waste what you invested in them. If it does get wasted, that’s my problem, not yours. Absorbing loss is my specialty. Trust me to do it without taking it out of your hide. The one thing I will not tolerate is a refusal to risk the treasure. How else does it multiply and grow? So no, I can’t have you not trusting me, not if the job’s to be done that I send you to do.

    a. And finally, the sheep and goats (25:31-26). “Boys”—or shall we make it “girls” this time? “I need you out there among *ta ethne*, taking risks with my treasure, also piercing the night with your lamps of trust in the impossible Party To Be. As you go, remember who you are: not merely my disciples, my missionaries, but much more than that, my

‘brothers,’ my ‘sisters,’ the ‘members of my family,’ the folks who are out there doing the ‘will of my Father in heaven’ as they spread around the marvels of his generosity” (see crucially 12:50, ref. 25:40).

b. “Girls, boys, it’s dangerous work. Watch these next few days to see precisely how dangerous it gets and where it will land me. Remember what I said, that when it’s your turn ‘you’ll be hated by all because of my name’ and again, that what they do to me they’ll do to you (10:22, 24-25). So don’t be in the least surprised when you wind up hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick, or in prison. Or flayed or boiled or crucified, for that matter. Or these days down on your knees with the barrel of an ISIS rifle shoved in your mouth.”

c. [Time out: it’s happening, folks, it’s happening; shame on us in our safe American suburbs for ignoring the happening, also in Nigeria, in Pakistan, in North Korea; in plenty of other parts where Christ-folk are loathed and feared, and where brutality is casual, and sometimes official. But is our disregard for the “least of these,” our own sisters and brothers in Christ, so ingrained and habitual that we can’t be bothered to peep a protest, or even to pray? “The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Yes? But back to our story—]

d. “Lest” (says Jesus to his missionaries) “the peril of your assignment gives you too much pause, let me show you now how thoroughly I’ve got your back. On that day when I come to judge the nations—the folks I’m sending you to, in particular the ones who never get around to joining our ranks—here’s the standard

I mean to use. Where they're concerned (not you), I don't plan to ask about their faith. Faith in me they haven't got. They don't know me from Adam. So instead—specifically where they're concerned, not you—I'll ask about their works. Yes, I know it deviates from the new and vastly better 'law of faith' that my future friend Paul will talk about (Rom. 3:27), but deviation is my prerogative, isn't it (20:15), and all the more when the deviation serves to amplify the wild generosity the Father sent me to kick-start.

e. "And in asking about their works, there's one thing and one thing only I'll want to know. How did they treat you? Correction: I won't ask. I'll know it already. And it's out of that knowing that I'll make my separation of sheep from goat. When *you* were hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, rotting in jail, did they help, or not? The smallest finger lifted on *your* behalf is all it will take for me to number them among the righteous. As I've said before, 'Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward' (10:42).

f. "Sisters, brothers, are you getting it? Do you grasp how profoundly you matter to me and always will, come hell, high water, or my own crucifixion? Off you go then, and get to work. Alertly. Energetically. With a light and joyful step."

20. Thus far our Lord. Our response? "Thanks be to God!" What else can it be?

21. Summarizing question: does a telling like this, anchored

in the whole Matthean context, lift the yoke from weary hearers (11:28-20)? Does it comfort the troubled conscience of the called-and-baptized disciple who knows too well that her own righteousness as a dispenser of mercy is a torn and shabby thing, and by no means a fit dress to wear to God’s party? More to the point, does it heap the glory, every speck of it, on the head of Christ, who decks us out in his own hard-earned raiment? I think it does. And thinking so, I commend it to you.

22. Remember, you could do worse. A lot worse. You could join the mass of readers, preachers, and hearers whose hearts are sure to sag as they chew away grimly this Sunday on Sheep-and-Goats, the Stand-Alone Version. But why would you want that? How could God want it for you?