

No Strangers Allowed Matthew 25:31-46

There is a joke that says
on Sunday when we read
this scripture in Matthew,
hearing it, the Catholics declared,
"But we adored your Blessed Sacrament!"
The Lutherans cried out,
"But we emphasized salvation by faith alone!"
Then the Presbyterians said,
"Wow, so you really do judge!"¹



This is the only Sunday
when even preachers who don't "meddle"
are allowed to well, meddle.
Which isn't what I'm going to do of course...
This is Sunday before Advent,
the Sunday that our church calendar calls,
Christ the King Sunday, which,
we know in the 1st century
that to declare Christ was king or Lord,
was to make a decisive political statement
against the government.
And not just a political statement
but declaring Christ as King
was a crime of sedition
—so how can we not meddle?

But aren't you over politics just a little?
Or maybe a lot over it?
Aren't we tired of being so divided
and put into labeled camps?
I'm glad even our mayoral election season is over,
the political signs and fliers and mailings
were everywhere.

Have you ever thought about the signs
that we use to sort people?

¹ Rev. Shane Page, http://day1.org/8075-shane_page_the_final_exam

Used to be a sign over the water fountains,
 'whites drink here, Negros drink here.'
When I was in high
 and worked downtown at Spainhours,
 women weren't allowed in the Arcade,
 we used to call it the pool hall,
 so I'd walk to the *order here* sign at the outside window.
Some cars have little fish signs
 so that you'll know they are Christians
 verses well, others cars
 that might not be Christian.
Signs have a way of being gatekeepers,
 they sort us into who can come in,
 who is allowed,
 who's in and who's out.

This business of sorting
 has us pretty divided, doesn't?
 This scripture may as well be
 a story about elephants and donkeys;
 sheep and goats,
 at this point it may not make a difference.



In the book, *The Big Sort*,
 author Bill Bishop describes
 how our sorting of ourselves
 is killing our communities.
 Here's an excerpt from their book
 on how our political sorting in the last 10 years
 is alarmingly harmful:

"There was the Sarasota, Florida,
 man who swerved his Cadillac
 toward Representative Katherine Harris
 as she campaigned on a street corner.
 (Harris had been the Republican secretary of state
 in Florida during the presidential
 vote recount in 2000.)

"I was exercising my political expression," Barry Seltzer told police.

...Two old friends arguing about the war in Iraq
 at an Eastern Kentucky flea market booth

pulled their guns when they got tired of talking.
Douglas Moore, age sixty-five,
killed Harold Wayne Smith because,
a witness said, "Doug was just quicker."

[...And speaking of signs...]

The most pathetic display of partisan havoc
started at the Owens Crossroads United Methodist Church
near Huntsville, Alabama.

The youth minister at the church
sent children on a "scavenger hunt"
shortly before the election.

On the list of items to be retrieved
were John Kerry campaign signs.

Once the kids toted the placards back to the church,
the minister piled them in the parking lot
and set the signs on fire.

The scavengers did the best they could,
but in Republican Huntsville
they found only eight signs,
barely enough for kindling.

Had the same hunt taken place in,
say, Seattle, the kids could have
rounded up enough fuel to signal the space shuttle."²

Those stories are almost 10 years old
but they could easily describe
the political climate now.

And not just our political lives
but the way we live out lives now.

We are good are putting up barriers
between us and them,
especially between us and the *least of these*.

Going about our lives
unaware that the presence of Christ
is just beyond our barrier.

² Excerpt from The Big Sort, by Robert G. Cushing and Bill Bishop <https://www.npr.org/books/titles/137985250/the-big-sort-why-the-clustering-of-like-minded-america-is-tearing-us-apart#excerpt>



Remember the story about the rich man and Lazarus?

I think it is a crime of zip codes
that lands the rich man
in a place of thirst and anguish.
It is only a fence, a gate
that separates Lazarus and the rich man on earth.
The rich man went about his life,
day in and day out,
unaware of Lazarus
on the other side of his fence
eating with the dogs.
In the end, the rich man lived out eternity
the way he lived his life;
he was separated from Lazarus,
separated by a heavenly zip code.
And you know, he was surprised by this!
He was shocked to find Lazarus
in the arms of Abraham
and himself separated and sorted out
to other side.

Rev. Shane Page in Pineville says,

“Now, you will see no gates surrounding my property,
thank you very much –
well, at least none of the visible kind.
My gates just happen to be of the invisible kind:
a certain zip code or school district
or property valuation insulating and distancing me,
even if unintentionally, from the least
for whom King Jesus has such visceral concern.
And I’m the one who may be
the most impoverished because of it.”³

As Jesus describes who is he,
and where we find him,
we must be careful;
because if we aren’t careful

³ Rev. Shane Page, http://day1.org/8075-shane_page_the_final_exam

we will find ourselves
moving closer and closer to a same center
—rather than moving outward.

We are clustering toward a center
and ignoring the margins
where the hungry and thirsty
and naked and lonely are;
where Christ is.

We cluster together and find we've already made
our camps of sheep and goats,
us and them.

You know what they say,
“whenever you draw a line
on who's in and who's out,
you always going to find Jesus
on the other side.”

Jesus is found precisely where we aren't.

To look at it politically,
what kind of leader goes after the voting constituent
with no physical address,
no driver's license and a criminal record?

What leader wants to give primacy to policies
for the folks no jobs,
no health insurance, no papers
and no stocks to cash in to contribute to the campaign?
Not any kind leader of we have today.

Apparently Christ is saying
that he's found precisely where we aren't.

He's hungry.

He's thirsty.

He's naked.

He's a stranger.

He's sick.

He's a prisoner.

In fact the only thing Jesus isn't,
is a semi-well adjusted person
with an education, decent job, health insurance;
maybe a pension and 2 weeks vacation time.

Which is most things we are and have.



David Lose, says what surprises him the most
in this passage,
is the surprise.⁴

The shock of both groups
on finding out that Christ is present.
Both group surprised
because they weren't doing anything
out the ordinary.

One group fed the hungry
and clothed the naked
with no thought of Christ being present.
The other group did not feed the hungry
or clothe the naked again,
with no thought of Christ being present.

**They were both surprised
by the presence of Christ.**⁵

Where would we find it surprising
to see the presence of Christ?
Are we willing to see Jesus
in the ones who are everything we are not?

When we continue to sort ourselves
into us and them,
it leads to a numbness,
a kind of unawareness that can catch us
by surprise.
Because the numb, unaware, sameness
that can develop when we are clustered
and think we are sheep,
means that we might miss where Jesus is
—if he is with those we aren't,
if he is with the least.

What do you mean
we did not give you a drink
when you were thirsty?
When were you
in prison and we didn't visit you?

⁴ Rev. Dr. David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/christ-the-king-a-surprised-by-god-again/>

⁵ ibid



Now, I want to get a little political.

Lest we get bogged down on trying to avoid
being goats by being sheep;
enlightened sheep because we now,
“know” the presence of Christ
is found in the sick and lonely
and hungry and thirsty;

I think there is another challenge for us here.

Because I’m fine to see
the presence of Christ

in our Sabbath Soup brothers and sisters
and our good Samaritan clients.

That to me, is a no brainer—
but there is a subtle hierarchy there;
a subtle hint of power,
where I’m a part of the privileged,
because I can hand out help.

So the challenge becomes,

Is it possible that we see this story as
Christ the King who came
to usher in a reign of judgment
that ends in mercy
because Christ is everywhere
we don’t expect him to be?

“Again and again,

God in Jesus shows up
where we least expect God to be—
to surprise us, disarm us,
overturn our expectations and judgments,
all in order to invite us
to give up our attempts
to redeem ourselves
– or even just to go it alone –
instead relenting to God’s redemptive,
surprising, and uncontrollable love.”⁶

⁶ David Lose <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/christ-the-king-a-surprised-by-god-again/>



Wouldn't it be surprising
if in fact Christ

was in all the places
we really didn't think that he would be
—his presences was in:
every racists who paints
swastikas and burns rebel flags in yards?
every tea party conservative
and every rainbow loving liberal?
every red blooded gun loving owner
and every earth loving tree hugger?
every religious radical who throws bombs into schools
and every religious universalist
who says all religions are the same?

all those who we absolutely disagree with...
the people who are in prison
because they actually
did something wrong?

Wouldn't that be really surprising?
Wouldn't it be surprising to think that
Christ is among the people we not only
count as the least, those of no account,
those we actually don't like?

What about finding Christ's presence
with someone like Roy Moore
and Charles Manson?

How in the world, right?
This isn't preaching,
and I'm about to go
beyond meddling, right?

I hate it when the gospel makes
even me squirm!

I hate when it makes me confront
the ways that my privileged
has "allowed" Christ's presence
to be only with *the least of these*.

Where would I be sorted
if I can't bring myself
to see Christ in the places
I don't want him to be?

A church member told me story
as he walked out of church
a few weeks ago.

He started out with,
“you probably don't believe in this kind of stuff”
...which of course meant
this was going to be good
—and it was beyond good.



Here's what he told me:

his daughter in law
wanted to speak her grandmother
who had died years ago.

So she went to see a psychic.

Now, this was a little out of character
—who knows if psychics
can really but trusted;

but she really just wanted
to talk her grandmother
and that the intention
seemed sincere and pure,
one of love and wonder
and perhaps a little curiosity,
so maybe that intention

would override any foul-play
or trickery that might come up.

Wonder upon wonder,
wouldn't you know,
they make contact!

She got to talk to grandma
and it turns out,
another person,
a surprise!

Another family member showed up

and wanted to talk too.

As the conversation wrapped up,
and I don't know the details
—truthfully they are probably a little fuzzy
as details tend to be
when we experience
something of life on the other side of the veil

...but as the communication wrapped up,
good byes were said to grandma
—the brother-in-law piped up.

You might think
he had a loving message
for his family
or something he never got to tell
his parents or children.

Nope.

What he had to say was completely
out of left field as the saying goes;
in other words it was a surprise,
it was shocking.

“Just so you know,
there are no pearly gates,” he said.
“Here, everyone is welcomed in.”

And then he was gone.

You know what I think?

I think there is a sign outside
—maybe stuck in a cloud
since we have it on good authority
that there are no gates,
but I think there is a sign
outside heaven that says,

No Strangers Allowed.

Not in the sheep and goats kind of separating,
who's in and who's out,
but more of a
'No Strangers Allowed'
meaning, in heaven there is
NO *us and them* mentality.

Everyone is welcomed in.

In heaven there are no strangers.

Maybe, its worth thinking about,
maybe it's worth the meddling.