

The Day to Day Practice of Compassion

Matthew 25: 31-46 (November 26, 2017)

Matthew 25: 44-45

44Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

Historical Context

Two aspects of context are especially important. First, the parable corresponds to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) as bookends for Jesus’ teachings in Matthew. The parable describes the key values and practices that define those who participate in the coming empire of heaven. Second, this passage is the capstone of Jesus’ long, winding answer to the question his disciples ask as he ends his occupation of the temple and prophesies its destruction: “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). Jesus answers this in many ways -- violent chaos, cosmic portents, “no one knows” -- but in this parable we learn that the coming Son of Man has been present all along among the most vulnerable members of the society.

Theme: The Day to Day Practice of Compassion

Jesus seems to be saying that if there is any sort of “Final Judgment,” then the criteria on which you will be judged will not be what you know or what you say you believe, but rather what you have actually done (or neglected to do) for the less fortunate — specifically, whether you have helped feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned (practices that are known as the “Traditional Works of Mercy.”) Indeed, the closest we can come to a transformative face-to-face encounter with Jesus is to aid and be fully present to the poor and marginalized.

We are challenged to grab a hold of the privilege we have to practice compassion on a day-to-day basis. Can we accept living by what has been called a “Franciscan Blessing.?” A Franciscan Blessing is a benediction in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi who famously gave up his inheritance to serve the poor. Here is one example of a Franciscan blessing:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.