

Listen!

A year ago we began our journey with Jesus, with Matthew as our guide.

Next week, believe it or not, its Advent already, and we shall spend the whole of this new church year with the Gospel of Mark.

And it occurs to me that something that is easy to miss as we spend a year on each gospel writer, is that each of the four Gospel writers has a particular point of view when it comes to telling the story of Jesus.

St. John is the mystical one.

He tells the story of Jesus as the story of God's new creation.

Luke loves the poor and the outsider.

Mark tells his story like a fast paced crime novel.

His favorite word is "immediately!"

And he ends his story with frightened women fleeing an empty tomb.

In Matthew's case, his community was very much at odds with the Jewish community.

And so throughout his gospel we see many examples of "us against them."

The "saved and the damned."

These different "takes" on Jesus by the earliest Christians aren't unique to them.

We too hear in Jesus the things that fit our circumstances.

The things that speak to our most pressing needs.

So whenever we encounter the gospel, pray that our eyes will be open to its depths, that our ears can hear even what is not said.

For example, when Matthew brings to us this last parable of Jesus, a parable told only to the inner circle, it's not a surprise that at first it seems to be a parable of "the good guys" and "the bad guys."

A parable with a very simple lesson.

Do good works to people in need and go to heaven.

Don't do good works — and go straight to hell.

The end.

But that take on today's parable is rather one-dimensional.

And if there's anything that Jesus isn't, it's being one-dimensional.

In fact, nearly all the stories Jesus tells have, tucked away in a not too obvious corner, a signal, a hint, that we need to look, to listen, a little closer.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, the shocking message is that a Samaritan, someone we might think of as a terrorist or KKK member or a Proud Boy, could be the good guy!

In the prodigal son, it's that the returning kid is welcomed home and even honored, NOT because he's sorry, but because of his blind trust in his father's love.

In today's parable, the hint that all is not what it seems is that both the sheep and the goats are shocked when they hear that the standard of judgment is caring for the least, the lost, and the left behind.

And perhaps what we can take from that hint is maybe this story isn't so much about who's going to heaven and who's going to hell.

Maybe it's a story about how to live in God's kingdom.

Now.

Today.

Maybe this story is intended to remind us that Jesus is wandering around today, even in our own neighborhood.

And the place to find him is among the least, the lost and the left behind.

These hints are a way of saying: slow down!

Look a little closer!

Because when Jesus talks, he's is telling us stuff that's not quite so obvious.

He's asking us to dive deeper than our own comfort level wants to allow.

And to develop the eyes to see more deeply, we need to look at all of the gospels, at all of the Bible, and ultimately at life itself, through the lens of Jesus — hanging in agony on the cross.

As he looks over the whole wide world, through all time and at all peoples, praying:

"Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."

Even as we do our worst to God, God brings God's best to us.

When we allow that point of view to inform our reading of scripture and our understanding of life, we get closer to seeing all that is through the eyes of God.

They are eyes of compassion.

They are eyes of mercy.

Compassion and mercy for all people.

Even President Trump.

Even President-elect Biden.

Even the woman who starved her child to death last week.

Even the heroic COVID doctors and nurses.

Even the richest woman in the world — and the poorest man.

I wonder if Jesus is challenging us to see that stories about weeds and wheat growing up together, and good and bad fish being hauled in together, stories about the just and unjust, maybe none of these are talking about separate groups of people — you “good folks” over here, you “bad folks” over there — as much as they are talking about our common problem.

That we are all of us complex mixtures of right and wrong.

Of insight and ignorance.

Of kindness and cruelty.

You need look no further than the motley crew that Jesus calls together to follow him.

A band of ignorant, trusting, frightened, hopeful, self-serving, wounded, courageous people.

A real cross section of the human race that includes tax collectors and prostitutes, rebels and small businessmen.

So when we come to the parable of the sheep and goats, and see it through the eyes of the crucified one, perhaps its point isn't separating the "good folks" over here and the "bad ones" over there.

We humans are so good at defining who is good and what isn't.

Yet, those definitions lead to so many of our wars.

Cause so many of our prejudices.

And are the ground of all of our fears.

Instead, perhaps today's parable intends to tell us something about ourselves.

Something about our destinies.

Perhaps the power of this parable is to remind us of the promise that our destiny, ultimately, and in God's own time, is to be made whole.

And complete.

And wise.

That God's plan for all of us is to finally remove from us our immaturity, self-absorption, and smallness.

Sending these off to be consumed in fire.

So that what remains is maturity, kindness and self-giving.

In other words, seeing the sheep and the goats through the eyes of Jesus on the cross, dare we say, dare we believe, dare we hope, that at the end of the day, the judgment of God is not punishment – but mercy?

I think that's what Paul is saying today as he holds high the banner of the good news to the people of Ephesus:

"May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him!

So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

What are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

And what is the immeasurable greatness of his power..."

The psalmist sings the same song:

"For the LORD is good;

his mercy is everlasting;

and his faithfulness endures from age to age."

And all we need do is have faith in that mercy.

Could it be that simply trusting in the love and forgiveness and mercy of this disconcerting God is the key that unlocks our salvation?

It's said that "the God you imagine – creates you." R. Rohr, Yes and..., 12.

Meaning, perhaps, that if we let ourselves be grasped by this tender God of mercy and forgiveness, then we too might begin to live lives of tenderness and mercy and forgiveness.

We too might begin to slowly see that God moves among us in the faces of the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

And once we see that truth, we might come to embrace, rather than reject, our own nakedness.

Our own ills.

Our own pains that too often lock us up in cells of self-pity, remorse or rage.

Because when we do, a miracle of healing is poured out.

A miracle who's gift is joy.

+amen