

**Christ the King**  
**November 20, 2011**  
**Matthew 25:31-46**

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

**This** morning's lectionary passage is a dangerous little pericope. If taken at its word, it appears to upend the whole of Christian orthodoxy and calls into question the very notion of unmerited grace.



If this passage were to be privileged over the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John, the heart of Christianity would be radically different.

Salvation would not be a matter of faith and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's savior, but salvation would be the hard, difficult work of doing good in the face of injustice and evil.

According to this passage, which purports to be the words of Jesus, the peoples of the earth will be judged by one universal standard: did you go meet Christ in the least of these? Did you give food to the hungry? Did you give drink to the thirsty? Did you welcome the stranger, the foreigner, the illegal alien? Did you clothe the poor? Visit the sick? Take care of those languishing in prison?

If you did, you will inherit the Kingdom of Christ; if you did not, you will be cast off into outer darkness.

According to this passage, the Christian, the Jew, the Muslim, the Hindu, the atheist—any of these may enter the kingdom or be shut out forever based solely upon one question: did you act with compassion; or were you silent and complicit in the face of injustice?

Last week I attended a Jewish Wedding, and there at the wedding were clergy of every stripe: Jewish, Christian, and even Muslim lay leaders. All of us had been drawn together by our work together with the Mississippi Religious Leaders Conference, an interfaith group dedicated to speaking out for justice and working for peace in our community and world. If this morning's passage is to be taken literally, then that beautiful wedding embodied something of Kingdom of God.

Could that really be true? Could God really accept anyone—Christian, Jew, or Muslim—who lives a life of obedience to the Kingdom values of Jesus?

If we choose to privilege this passage above the Johannine and Pauline writings; then the teachings of Pelagius, who taught that we are justified by our works, become normative, and the hegemony of Augustinian theology collapses altogether. John Calvin's own teachings become heresy, not orthodoxy, and every one of our Confessional statements must be re-written.

So, what do we do with a passage like that?

We could ignore it, which seems to me to be the preferred tactic of most pastors. We could write-off Jesus' words as mere hyperbole, or we could reinterpret them in a more congenial fashion.

One theory is that Jesus isn't here speaking to Christians, but non-Christians. He is saying to the nations of the earth, and specifically to the Gentile nations of the earth, that they will be judged as to how they treat those who come bringing the message of the Gospel. Those nations which abuse, oppress, and persecute the church—the visible body of Christ—will be condemned forever, but those nations and peoples who attend to this wounded body of believers with kindness and compassion will be accepted and reconciled by their actions.

This interpretation not only preserves the notion of unmerited grace, but speaks to a wider grace available to a great many people who may not themselves be counted among the visible church. It's no wonder, then, a great many theologians and scholars of choice chose this interpretation.

I would like to propose a different track: What if we allow this passage to be held in tension with Paul's words about grace and the unmerited, underserved love of God.

What would Christianity look like if both were true, even as they appear to contradict one another?

What if we are saved, absolutely and completely, as a gracious act of unmerited, underserved grace AND at the same time, what if our inclusion in the Kingdom of God hinges on doing works of compassion and being merciful and kind to the hurting of the world.

I have come to believe that both of these seemingly inconsistent, incongruous and contradictory teachings are true and point to divine realities which are timeless and unchanging.

I'm not yet ready to say HOW both of these theologies of salvation are true, but I am convinced that they do fit together—correcting each other, challenging each other, fighting with each other as they do.

Both Pelagius and Augustine were on to something—both of these saw a part of that great divine reality—both of them were right, and both of them were wrong, and we must listen to both and be mindful of both.

How can this be: because divine realities are, at some point, fundamentally mysterious. In other words, divine realities cannot be reduced to simple human platitudes, no matter how logical and well-thought out they may be.

The truth of our faith is truth in tension. We believe in God's divine sovereignty, but we also believe in human responsibility. We believe in the divine lordship of Christ, but we also believe in Jesus' real humanity. We believe the scriptures were written by human beings who choose their own words and used their own minds, and yet we believe the scriptures to be the written word of God.

We always seem to get into trouble when we give up the tension and choose one side or the other.

So, somehow it's true that our salvation is absolutely an unmerited, underserved act of God's grace, AND it's true that we are tested and judged by our actions and inactions.

Enough theology...now I'll tell you a story.

When I was serving a church in Mobile, AL, one of my members was convalescing in a nursing home for a few months and I would go and see her often. Her room was at the back of the nursing home, so I had to walk down a series of confusing corridors before reaching her room.

Though this nursing home had a good reputation in town, it was not my favorite place to be. It was crowded, cramped, even dark in places. There were smells of every kind that greeted you and sometimes assaulted you, as you walked down the halls.

I saw the bodies of sick and aged people, tired and sad, confined to wheelchairs and beds.

But one room in particular broke my heart. The patient in this room was not old, but a young man, maybe a man in his 20's as I was at that time.

He was hardly recognizable as a man. He was a pile of bones balled up into the fetal position. He did not appear to me to be able to communicate. He stared at his walls and at the door as he lay balled up in a small chair. The walls of his room were decorated with posters of Muppets.

Every time I walked by that room, my heart hurt. This young man had been cheated out of life—out of everything. I wondered about him—had that been his state from birth? Did he have people in his life that loved him? Did they bother to visit him?

I like to think that he did have people who loved him; who visited him; who placed pictures of Muppets on his walls. But, I never saw anyone visiting with him.

Once I walked by the room and he was curled up on his bed, but most of the time he was balled up in that chair. He was always alone; his room was always quiet.

I never went in to visit with him, even though my heart told me I should. Every time I would walk by that room, staring in, filled with pity and sadness, and never did I bring another poster for him, or just step in the room to pray for him.

I would pray for him as I passed the room, as if that somehow counted for Christian compassion, as if that somehow absolved me of any greater duty.

I could have stopped by the nurses' station to inquire about him. I could have asked if it was alright if I visited him from time to time.

Even if he couldn't communicate with me, at least he would have seen a kind face of another young man. He may not have understood the words of a prayer, but at least he could have known that someone had come to visit him. I could have brought him a stuffed animal, a poster, anything.

But I didn't. I walked right on passed, every time.

If we take this passage seriously, then I wasn't simply passing by my Christian duty, but I was passing by Jesus. I had chosen to ignore Jesus, as he lay there in need, waiting for me to visit with him and express even the smallest acknowledgement of kindness toward him.

Instead, I passed by, broken heart, yes, but what good is compassion never realized?

I know I failed. I know I fail, not just that young man, but Jesus. It was easier to stay in my comfort zone; easier to pass on by that room.

I choose the easy path and failed to show the love and grace of God's kingdom.

My prayer today is twofold: First, I pray that I never pass by Christ in need again. I pray that I will stop; that I will ask; that I will enter. TO be a part of God's kingdom requires faithful action, obedience and radical discipleship, not mere lip service and a few prayers. I pray that I Christ will equip me and ready me, to be faithful and obedient when I encounter him among the least of these.

My second prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving. I know my good deeds can never outweigh my failures—for I am guilty, not only of sinful acts, but also of sins of omission. I know that I haven't earned and can never earn my salvation. I know that any hope I have of being included in God's kingdom is the unmerited grace and love of my savior and lord. I know that Christ forgives me and that my inclusion in the kingdom is not a matter of my own merit, but of the righteousness of Christ which dwells within me.

These two prayers do not stand in tension; even as they reveal that we live in the tension between God's warnings and God's promises. We know that God is a God of love and that we are saved by faith in Christ Jesus; yet we also know that we are tested and judged by our actions and that we cannot be citizens of God's realm if we fail to demonstrate compassion and love and so betray Christ by our complicity in systems of evil and injustice.

Amen.