



**"Homeless Jesus"**

**Scripture – Matthew 25:31-46**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, November 26, 2023**

We have reached the end. Today is the final Sunday on the church calendar. Next week we begin Advent and a new liturgical year. Our year ends with the classic end-of-the-world imagery. The last Sunday serves up the last judgment. It is such a familiar passage it runs the risk of becoming cliché. Yet it is also disturbing, isn't it? Will the God of love really cast into the darkness those who had a chance at a beautiful life, but blew it?

You may have seen the fascinating sculpture entitled, "Homeless Jesus." It is a bronze sculpture by a Canadian named Timothy Schmalz that depicts Jesus as a homeless person sleeping on a park bench. The original was installed in 2013 at Regis College, University of Toronto, but there is a copy in Center City Philadelphia on Race Street and in numerous cities throughout the world.

A figure is sleeping on his side, huddled beneath a blanket, his head and hands obscured. The only clue to his identity is that his bare feet are sticking out the bottom of the blanket. His feet bear the marks of the crucifixion.

Schmalz describes his work of art as a visual translation of today's passage in which Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the poor, the stranger, the ill, and the imprisoned, and then says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."

As you might guess, people react to the sculpture in a variety of ways. Some are appalled by it, others adore it. Some pause, kneel, and pray beside it. At one of the installations, a woman called the police. She thought it was a real homeless person.<sup>1</sup>

Both the sculpture and our passage demand that we focus like a laser on our view of Jesus. He is one who identifies with the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed.

These verses from Matthew paint one of the most riveting scenes in all of Scripture. Christ sits on a throne and all the nations are gathered before him. Numerous artists have tried their hand at capturing

this moment. There is one in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, that shows Christ with his right hand open and welcoming, and his left hand turned down and casting away.

Note that the passage does not say this is a gathering limited to Christians. In fact, the passage makes no distinction based on religion. It declares that people of *all nations* are gathered before Christ.

Once all are gathered, he acts like a first century shepherd, who at the end of the day separates the sheep from the goats. And he says to the sheep, "You are the blessed ones; you are the ones who inherit God's kingdom; because my stomach was swollen with hunger and you fed me. I was dirty and parched and you gave me a drink. I was odd-looking and unknown, but you welcomed me. I was so poor that I was wearing worn-out rags from Goodwill, and you clothed me. I was suffering with an illness, and you took care of me. I was in prison, ashamed, and wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and you visited me."

And the response of these people is revealing. They do not exchange high-fives and shout, "Yes, we did it!" Instead, there is a puzzled look on their faces as they question: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty? When was it that we saw you a stranger?" When did we see you ill or in prison? And he responds with the words that have thundered down through the centuries: "Whenever you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."

A core conviction of Christianity is born: whenever we extend compassion to anyone in need, we touch the very life of Christ.

And, as the passage continues, we discover that the reverse is also true. Whenever we fail to care for one who is in need, we turn our back on Christ.

This passage really rattles the theology of any of us who think that all that really matters is what we believe. Did you catch what the passage says about what you must believe to be a sheep rather than a goat? There is not a single word about beliefs. It is conspicuously absent. Christ separates sheep from goats not based on what we believe but on how we treat people in need – and there are so many today.

Writing from a Nazi prison shortly before he was executed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer pondered the future of the Christian Church and wrote: "The church is the church only when it exists for others...The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must show people what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others."<sup>2</sup>

This notion that we would focus on others rather than ourselves, that we would focus outward rather than inward, flows against much in current culture.

A colleague was listening to professor and podcaster Kate Bowler interview a psychologist about parenting teenagers. "About halfway through the interview, their conversation touched on the popular truism that self-care is the first line of defense against mental distress...The psychologist said, "Self-care is very focused on the self. But if we want to feel better, often what is needed is to think about what other people need and caring for them...making oneself of use. Not to some extreme; not martyrdom. But there is a real limit to how much self-care can help us."

Bowler replied, "So often we focus on boundaries around ourselves...But you're saying what is needed is being attuned to other people."<sup>3</sup>

I suspect all of us have experienced the good feeling of making a sacrifice for someone else. It evokes positive feelings and a sense of fulfillment. Giving ourselves for the well-being of another contributes to a sense of purpose and meaning, and sparks a sense of accomplishing something worthwhile.

Matthieu Ricard is known to science as the happiest man in the world. When studied along with hundreds of others, the upbeat impulses measured in his brain were off the chart. If he is the happiest person, what is his secret? He says, "Seeking happiness for oneself alone is doomed to certain failure, since self-centeredness is the very source of our discontent...Even if we show all the outward signs of happiness, we cannot be truly happy if we fail to take an interest in the happiness of others."<sup>4</sup>

What brings us into harmony with ourselves and the universe is compassion. All of the great spiritual leaders of the world's religions name compassion as the path to happiness and peace. Each major religious tradition has something akin to the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you wish to be treated. This maxim dates back to at least 500 B.C.E.

In his ministry of healing, in his welcoming of those whose lives were broken, and in his teachings to his followers, Jesus underscored the importance of compassion. He taught that God abounds with compassion toward us and that we are to be compassionate with each other.

The word "compassion." derives from a Latin word that means to "suffer with another" or "bear a burden with another." It is to feel another's pain as if it were our own and is illustrated by the proverb to walk in another person's shoes.

To be compassionate does *not* mean that we constantly allow other people's agendas to drive our lives or that we never engage in self-care. It does not mean we exhaust ourselves trying to fix others. Matthieu Ricard is a model of happiness because he has removed himself from the center of the universe, while not giving up the things that feed his soul. He's found the right balance. He writes books that are intended to help others, but he also gains great satisfaction from writing and getting published. He loves photography so he carves out time to take pictures. However, at his core is a fundamental feeling of compassion toward others. It guides all he does. He does not imagine himself locked in competition with people. He does not view strangers with distrust. He does not approach others with the notion that he must win them over to his point of view. He does not search for flaws in others in order to pass judgment. He is generous in his view of others, he wants them to thrive, and he reaches out with loving kindness.

A few weeks ago, many of you heard our Westminster Distinguished Speaker Tom Long. For several years he taught at Princeton Seminary, and one evening he went to a church supper at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton. He sat down at one of the tables and began chatting with the man next to him. Tom asked, "Are you new here?"

The man responded, "No. I've been a member here my whole life."

"Is that right?" Tom said.

"That's right. And I'm the last nonintellectual left in this church."

Tom said, "Really?"

"It's true. I haven't understood a sermon in this church for 25 years."

Tom looked puzzled and stated the obvious: "But you're still here."

"Oh, I'd never leave," the man said. "Every Monday night a group of us go to the boys' detention center. We play, sometimes we pray. We tell them that the worst thing in their lives does not define them. I've come to love those boys and I want them to know it. Dr. Long, I don't see Jesus often, but when I do, it's mostly on Monday nights with those boys."<sup>5</sup>

Might today's passage be not about a *last* judgment that falls somewhere in the future, but a judgment on each day of our lives and what it means to flourish? If we focus solely on ourselves, life is hell. However, if we have compassion for people who are hurting, we taste a bit of heaven.

#### NOTES

1. Debi Thomas, "You Did It To Me," *journeywithjesus.net*, November 15, 2020.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York: MacMillan, 1971), p.382-383.
3. Ginna Bairby, "Looking into the Lectionary," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 13, 2023.
4. Matthieu Ricard, *The Art of Meditation*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), p.17-18.
5. Tom Are, "You Never Know Where He Might Appear," April 9, 2023.

### **Prayers of the People ~ KC Morrison**

Dear God. We come now struggling to sustain the best in ourselves for the sustenance of the least among us; for the most vulnerable; for those fighting against each other; for those perpetually misused by others. In this struggle our inherent goodness is not in question. It is rather that the scope of the need, the vulnerability, the in-fighting, the abuse of others all but overwhelm us.

So, Dear God, we bow this morning asking that you increase our strength and resolve in the face of what seems daunting. Renew our commitment to deploy all of our gifts to the restoration of hope for the least among us; for the quarreling; for the tired, weary, and hungry; and for those impaired by mental illness. Help us to reflect on the challenges that Jesus faced, and the model he set. He experienced the full range, and more, of what confronts us. But the path he trod and his manner of engagement provide a model we so desperately need just now.

To this end we call out the names of some of these burdens. We ask that you give us sufficient renewal in this advent season to reassert ourselves anew. As we look with expectation to the celebration of the

birth of that model man, Jesus, release our storehouse of inherent goodness so that we can rise to the best of ourselves.

Dear God, we come asking a special consideration for the burdens literally just outside our doorsteps. May our energies be released to respond to those men and women we encounter everyday as we traverse the streets of Wilmington and New Castle County. Some are hungry; some have no place to sleep; some are self-medicating to ease pains of mind, body, and soul. Help us to find it in our hearts to support our community-based resources designed to diminish these burdens: Friendship House, New Life Furnishings, Emmanuel Dining Room, the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI).

Some live in food deserts. These are communities without what we take for granted: a neighborhood grocery market; personal transport and gas; a neighborhood safe from gun violence. Help us to find it in our hearts to support our community-based resources designed to diminish these burdens: the Community Fridges in Northeast Wilmington; the Hanover Food Pantry; a simple act of empathy like the First Friday Peace March.

Dear God, we come asking a special consideration for the burdens across the world, writ small by the gift of science and technology, where everything everywhere seems right here right now! This elevates the challenge of walking in your way beside those whose language or customs we do not know. But what we do know is that they, like us, are all children of God.

Some in that vast firmament are experiencing warfare, violating every principle of cooperation you showed us. Some are experiencing exploitation where brothers and sisters are rendering each other the enemy, obliterating our every instinct to love, trust, and uplift. Help us to find it in our hearts to support our community-based resources designed to diminish these burdens: The Palestine Children's Relief Fund; fuel-efficient stoves for women in Guatemala; and the Middle East Peace Initiative.

Dear God, just help us every day to be our better selves, so that we may utter with confidence and resolve the words you gave to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,  
and the glory, forever. Amen.**