

**Sermon on Matthew 25:31-46 and Ezekiel 34:11-16**

**Susan Verbrugge**

**Blacksburg Presbyterian Church**

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Jobless claims reach a sixteen year high. Wall Street falls to its lowest average in six years. Foreclosures continue to be rampant as officials question the bailout of the financial system. More than 130 lose jobs in the region.

The headlines are frightening. And, the economic situation hits close to home as well. Some of us in retirement or close to retirement are fearful as we watch 20-40% of our retirement savings go down the tubes. Some of us haven't been able to sell our houses. Some of us live in fear of losing our jobs. Some of us wonder how we will pay for our children's education. We are living in a time of great fear.

Even in the midst of our own worries, I ask you for a moment to consider those who live at the bottom of our economic ladder, those who before this crisis began were having to choose whether to buy food for their families or medicines that control their blood pressure, those who were struggling each month to pay the rent in the shack they were living in, those who had to go to the food pantry each month in order to stretch the family income far enough to be able to survive. Imagine what rising prices, job layoffs, and economic crisis means for them.

So just where is God in all of this? The front of the cover on Sojourners Magazine this month says, "Where Is God in All This?" with a picture of a hundred dollar bill burning in the background. It is a question that might be on the minds and hearts of many of us.

After reading these passages today from Ezekiel and Matthew, I think if we listen carefully, we might hear the answer to our question.

But honestly, I don't really want to listen to these passages, especially from Matthew. They scare me. I certainly don't want to be a goat...even knowing that many times, I am just that, a goat. I guess what I don't want is for God to name my goatishness and banish me away

forever. At least, that's the way I've read this passage in the past, as an either/or sort of thing. You are either a goat or a sheep. Period. You are either in or out. You are either given the reward of heaven or the fires of hell.

Except this time, I've heard something a bit different. Actually, I've heard two new nuggets. The first is that there is sheep and goat in all of us. Within us, rattling around in there, is the ability to be all about me, without seeing the deep needs of others. And also in there is the ability to get outside of ourselves, to see the needs and longings of others. Could that be what Jesus meant? Jesus is about separating out what is deeply good and right and loving from that which is selfish and mean and sinful within us. He lifts up the good and sends the ugly packing. So, in this way, the judgment here becomes good news, deep, wonderful good news.

For it means that as the layers of yuck are peeled away, we are given the freedom to live as God created us to be, as people who live not just unto ourselves, but live in deep love for one another, in wholeness for all people. And this isn't something that just happens after we die. It happens now, in this very moment, so that we may have abundant life now. As we are able to choose life, to choose the way of Jesus, today, we are given abundant life. That's not to say that the choice is easy...for our world pulls us toward the selfish, hoarding way of life. But, Jesus offers abundance for our lives and our souls when we can let go of our clenched fists and give to others.

The second fresh word I hear in this passage is that this judgment is not about us as only individuals. We need to be aware how Jews in Jesus' time would have heard these words. They would have had no concept of the individualism that we espouse today. For them, it wasn't all about me. It was all about us. The words that God had to say were not said to them as individuals, but to the community. When the prophets spoke, they spoke God's love and God's judgment on God's people as a whole. And for the Jews, the law was given to the people from God to bring out the best in all of us as a community. And so, they would have heard these words from Jesus as words to them as a whole.

And, in verse 32 of the Matthew passage, we find a surprise. My mom always used to tell me that a pronoun had to match whatever it was referring to in gender and in number. Well, apparently, Greek moms said the same thing. And, in verse 32, the nations gathered before God is a neuter word while the people that are separated by God from one another is a masculine word. They don't match. So, this might tell us that the people, each and every person, in the nations will be held accountable for how the nations have treated the needy.

I remember a professor in seminary telling us this. I didn't like it then, and I still don't like it now. Each and every one of us is responsible for how the nations treat those who don't have a place to lay their head or a bit of bread to eat or who sit in prisons, alone. That is a heavy load for us to carry. Walter Wink, a theologian, minister, professor, and author, puts it this way: "Each must take individual responsibility, insofar as they are able, for the behavior of the corporate systems to which they belong" (*The Human Being*, Fortress Press, 2001).

And Joan Chittister, a Catholic nun and champion for social justice around the world, puts it this way: "The nation that lowers its standards of justice and mercy, integrity and human dignity, is far more guilty than the individual who is lost in the swamp of them, alone and unguided. A Church that fails to be the Jesus it preaches and the God it proclaims is corrupt at the core without a doubt. Nevertheless, in the face of the cry for social responsibility, the individual stands in the dock as well" (*In Search of Belief*, Liguori Publications, 2006; 155). We are all in it together, as one body and as individuals.

So where do we see God in these times? Well, according to this passage, it is not in our worry over our checkbooks or our stock portfolios. We see God in the face of the marginalized in society. That is where we meet Jesus. That is where transformation of our lives takes place. In those meetings, we are to be about feeding and clothing, housing and visiting. We are to be about all those things as individuals and as a people. But, we are also to be about challenging and working to make sure that the nations are taking care of the marginalized.

Yes, there is a problem when 923 million people in the world are hungry, and 16,000 children die every day because of hunger related causes. That's 1 child dying every 5 seconds. Now. (five seconds) Now. (5 seconds) Now.(5 seconds)Now.

There is a problem when in Montgomery County with a population of 84,500, 16,807 people are at 100% of the federal poverty level. That means that for a family of four, they make \$21,000/year. That is not enough to live on.

We all stand before the judgment seat right this very minute. And, I am very uncomfortable. I hope, hearing these statistics, you are too.

But, as I stand there, this passage is hopeful. For Jesus Christ is about making all things new. This passage stands as a reminder to us that God is about getting rid of the goatishness that too often pervades what we do and how we live. And, it serves as a provoker, a cattle prod, to make us sit up and take notice about how we live, and how we contribute to the way the nations take care of the people.

Are there ways to make a difference in the nations' actions? Certainly there are! Sign Bread for the World letters right after worship. The letters go straight to congress persons to demand that we take care of the poor and the hungry all over the world. Bring cans of fruit for the Christmas store. Fill up your grocery cart for the Interfaith Food Pantry. Spend a few hours with the PRAYS team as they repair people's homes. Say hello to a homeless person and buy her a meal. Sit with an elderly person at Heritage Hall who has no visitors. Join with the PC(USA) Washington Office in contacting senators and representatives to support peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Join with the PC(USA) Hunger Program in working for a living wage for all people. Join the tutoring program in the prison. Go through the Advent devotional put out by the PC(USA) Peacemaking Program and see how God might be working in you to change the way you live. Call someone who you know is lonely. Pray. Pray. Pray. Push this church and the church universal to "see" the needs of our sisters and brothers and to respond to

them locally, nationally, and globally. Challenge us to be Jesus Christ in the world, healing, challenging, loving, befriending the outcast and the bereft.

Are we judged? This passage says so. We are judged by a God who expects loving justice and kindness for all people. We are judged by a God who is the giver of mercy in Jesus Christ. So, hear the words of the Good News of Christ. And let us go out into the world as God's people, proclaiming the love of Christ through bread and clothing, through housing and visiting, through justice and love for all people. Let us choose the abundant life of Jesus Christ. Amen.