

Pentecost 29A Christ Reigns
Peace, Seattle
November 26, 2017
Matthew 25:31-46

SEEING THE OTHER, SEEING JESUS

Her name is Kay Abe (Ah-bay), but to those who've come to know her she is Mother, she is Auntie, she is Grandma. She is that the older woman who's known and loved because of her kind and generous way of being in the world.¹

In addition to being that kind of touchstone for her immediate neighbors, Kay has a ministry that takes her out of her neighborhood, takes her to a parking lot under the freeway at 6th and Columbia where she and an unofficial team of church and community volunteers serve 200-300 hot meals beginning at 8pm, four nights a week.

It's called, THE LORD'S TABLE.

I'VE BEEN DOING THIS FOR 23 YEARS, FEEDING THE HOMELESS
IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S COMMAND: "WHEN YOU DO IT UNTO THE LEAST OF THESE...
YOU DO IT UNTO ME." SO IT'S A REAL PRIVILEGE, she says with a smile.

One of the volunteers these days is a man named Daniel who ate in Kay's line for 9-10 years before his life turned around. Daniel is now actively involved at St. John the Baptist parish, and organizes the congregation's participation in the Lord's Table program every other month.

I DON'T KNOW IF I COULD HAVE SURVIVED ON THE STREETS WITHOUT IT, says Dan.
THERE ARE NOT MANY PLACES YOU CAN GO AT 8 O'CLOCK AT NIGHT AND KNOW THAT
THERE'S GOING TO BE HOT FOOD AND THIS LITTLE LADY WHO'S GOING TO TELL YOU
HOW MUCH SHE LOVES YOU.

The origin of this ministry didn't begin with Kay. It began with a woman she and her husband had come to know at the church they attended at the time. This woman, a widow and mother of 8, had met a man who was formerly homeless and had become a Christian. His heart was filled with compassion for the homeless, and he convinced this woman—who'd become his wife—they ought to feed the homeless.

The woman worked at a Chinese noodle shop and would collect the rejected noodles, make a broth, and then she and her husband would take the hot soup in their old Volkswagen down to the local park, set up their single table and serve.

It was Kay's son Norman who learned about this ministry and brought it to the attention of his mother suggesting they go and help. Kay was reluctant at first, but when she went and saw the depth of faith evident in this couple and their work, she was deeply impressed and began to help.

Then the woman's husband took ill and died, making the woman a widow for the second time. Since the woman didn't drive, it became clear that the feeding ministry would not continue without different leadership. **That's when Kay stepped in.**

IT FELL INTO MY LAP, Kay chuckles, BUT I BELIEVE IT WAS THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO
OPENED THE DOOR, BECAUSE I WOULD NEVER HAVE DONE IT ON MY OWN.

¹ I became aware of this story through a colleague, Rev. Kate Wesch of St. John the Baptist Episcopal Parish, West Seattle, who pointed me to a short film on Vimeo, directed by Mark Titus and produced by Susan LaSalle and Jeanne and Craig Kobayashi. This characterization of Kay is by Craig. <https://vimeo.com/113761926>

The lines have grown longer over the years Kay has led this ministry. But still she welcomes everyone in line as if they were her own children.

THEY CALL ME MOMMA, she laughs, — GRANDMA! I TELL THEM.

It may have been the Holy Spirit calling, but that hasn't made it easy. Once, in 2004, when the feeding took place at a location known for trouble, Seattle's mayor issued an order forbidding feeding programs to serve after 6pm. The Lord's Table was the only one.²

The order caused quite an uproar. Not wanting to get ticketed or arrested, Kay stayed away that night.

YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED? she says with a glint in her eye.

THE CITY COUNCIL PEOPLE CAME OUT AND SERVED FOOD. The order was rescinded.

The whole journey, Kay says, has been a miracle.

Our parable from Matthew 25 is the final one that appears in Matthew's gospel, and its placement here, just before Jesus' passion, is purposeful. It's as if Matthew is saying:

IN CASE YOU MISSED THE ETHIC EMBEDDED IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT,
OR WEREN'T TUNED IN WHEN JESUS TOLD US FAITH MUST HAVE NOT ONLY HEART BUT
HANDS AND LEGS TOO, HERE'S A FINAL WORD ON THE SUBJECT.

Building on the image from the prophet Ezekiel and other writers of his time, Jesus speaks of a final judgment when the Human One will come in glory, seated on his throne.

It's important to notice that this judgment is framed as a judgment of the NATIONS—of non-Jewish, non-Christian peoples and communities.

Matthew wrote his gospel toward the end of the 1st century, at a time when followers of Jesus were increasingly persecuted. The parable addresses the question:

What will God do with those outside the faith community—those who persecute Christians, on the one hand, and those who feed, visit, and clothe them, on the other?³

The short answer is, God will set things right. But there's more to it than this. In this parabolic preview of what's in store, Jesus' followers are given a way to view outsiders in a different light.

The Lord, the parable teaches, will remember the suffering his little ones have endured, yes. But he will also remember the kindness and compassion of those beyond their circle who might otherwise be thought of as enemies.

Updating the parable to our time gets tricky. There are certainly plenty of Christians in the world today who fall into the category of "least of these"; who face persecution for their faith; who suffer at the hands of governments, or armies, or other entities; but we are not among them.

Perhaps this is why an interpretation of the parable which sees ourselves NOT as "the least of these" but rather as those who are called to serve "the least of these" seems more natural and appropriate to us as a lens on this text.

² See the August 9, 2004 issue of the Seattle Post Intelligencer: <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Nickels-halts-evening-meals-at-City-Hall-Park-1151254.php>

³ David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Working Preacher*. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3477

There is without doubt an ethical prerogative here; one to which Kay Abe responded, one which animates many of our individual and collective efforts toward our own ministries of compassion, like Mary's Place hosting, Christmas giving tree, lunch at Walgreen's parking lot in White Center, Care for Creation, Food Bank ministries and the like.

But this prerogative does not, and should not, find its primary motivation in FEAR—the fear of what will face us if we don't embrace it. Fear may be a motivator for many behaviors, but true compassion is not one of them.

In the section of Matthew which follows today's reading, we watch the Good Shepherd offer himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lord whose crucifixion and resurrection open a new trajectory for all people and all creation is a Lord in whom mercy trumps judgment; in whom forgiveness paves the way for transformation.

Fear doesn't have the wherewithal to get us there. It was the forgiving Christ who, showing his wounds, led his followers out of their prisons of fear on Easter evening and into the light of a new day.

So how are we to understand the destiny of sheep and goats in our story?

The purpose of this parable—in fact this whole collection of parables of judgment in Matthew 25, like so many of the prophetic words found in Scripture—is not to summarily condemn us, but to help us see things clearly BEFORE it's too late.

Like the ghost who comes to Ebenezer Scrooge from the future, these texts call us to a new course of action NOW, so that a trajectory of dejection can be replaced by a trajectory of blessing.

In this sense, this word which meets us this morning meets us both as judgment and as hope. What kind of future, it asks, would you rather be part of?

Our life as the baptized begins just here—

- **With who we see when we look in the mirror;**
- **who we see when we look at one another;**
- **who we see when we look at “the least of these.”**

A conversion takes place within us when we discover Jesus in the Other. That conversion may begin with our eyes, but it eventually encompasses every part of us—hands, legs, mind, heart.

I THINK WE SERVERS GET MORE BLESSED THAN THE PEOPLE WHO EAT, says Kay Abe.
IT'S JUST A MIRACLE.

Amen?