

## What Kind of Leader?

Matthew 25:31-46

November 30, 2008

O.K., it's the Sunday after Thanksgiving so we just have to start with a couple of Thanksgiving related jokes. Do you know what the definition of leftovers is? Bits of food – kept in the refrigerator – until they are old enough to be thrown away.

Do you know what an optimist is? It's a person who has a 28-pound turkey for Thanksgiving and the next day asks, "What's for lunch?"

In one of the Family Circus' cartoons, it's the day after Thanksgiving and Billy is looking at the table full of food as he says, "We asked God to bless this last night!"

There's a familiar scene on greeting cards and in history books with a pilgrim family walking toward a church. One mother tried to explain to her children the scene on a card they received from a neighbor. She told them that the pilgrim children liked to celebrate thanksgiving by attending church with their parents.

One of the youngsters was looking very intently at the card. Finally, he voiced his skepticism: "Well, if those children liked to go to church so much, why is their father walking behind them with a rifle in his hand?"

Today's parable may be one of the most vivid ones Jesus ever told. Its basic message is almost impossible to miss: on judgment day – on the day of reckoning – the Son of Man will assume this king-like role, only it's more like a shepherd king, and he will divide all of humanity into two groups. Some will be directed to stand on the right and some to stand on the left. The ones on the right he likens to sheep and the ones on the left to goats.

Those on the right will be there because the king will say that they have cared for his hunger, thirst, loneliness, nakedness. The ones on the left will be there because they've neglected to care for those needs of the Son of Man. And both groups will be shocked by the encounter with the judging shepherd-like king. They will both wonder when they saw the Lord in such predicaments. And the shepherd-like king will answer both groups of people: "When you did it for one of the least around you, you did or did it not to me."

There's no possible way we can miss Christ's message here is there? "You're in if you satisfy the basic human needs of the unfortunate and you're out if you neglect them." Sure it's hard at times. Sure there are some situations we would rather not get involved in. Sure there are some people who stretch our patience, challenge our sensitivities and our political way of seeing the world, or are in conflict with the morals we have established for ourselves. We need to somehow adopt into our being that attitude that Mother Teresa offered as an explanation for how she could minister to the people in the kind of horrid conditions she did. "I just pretend they are Jesus." Every time we do something that helps those who cannot help themselves, we are ministering to Jesus.

Bishop William Willimon tells of a Sunday after church when he and his family stopped at a local restaurant for a bite to eat. The restaurant was crowded and the woman serving their table seemed especially tired, practically weary.

When they finished their meal and the restaurant was emptying Willimon decided to be a little pastoral and said to her: “You look tired – are you okay?”

She shared with him that she had been up most of the night with her sick little boy but that she was really okay.

Willimon then said to her: “It must be hard after being up all night, having to stand on your feet and work so hard.”

She just nodded.

Then he asked: “What’s the hardest day of the week at work?”

She didn’t know that he was a reverend. She answered, “The hardest day of the week is Sunday. I dread all the people who come here after church. They make so many demands and some of them are so hateful. And they never tip hardly anything.”<sup>1</sup>

“When, Lord, when did I...?”

Willimon also tells of when his daughter was little that she would ask him the same question over and over: “Daddy, where’s Jesus? Where’s Jesus, daddy?” He said it went on for close to three years but then she stopped perhaps because she got tired of wondering and his pathetic answers.

Later in his sermon he reflected on the fact that today she is a parent and teaches third graders. He noted that she often comes home and tells him about her kids. “La Tron, whose only safe place in all his life is that little classroom. The Indian student barely able to understand English who comes and sits as close to her desk as she can get day after day with frightened eyes. The bully that wants her attention all day long.” And he concluded his sermon with: “If I ever asked my teacher-daughter where I might find Jesus today, I think I know what she would say. I think I know.”<sup>2</sup>

“When, Jesus, when did I...?”

Peter Storey, former bishop of The Methodist Church in South Africa, preached a powerful sermon based on Matthew 6:33. He observed in it: “Who is the focus of the Church? Who is the person we are concerned about? The person we exist to serve? For Jesus there was no question. In the Kingdom, the humble are lifted high and the most vulnerable have pride of place. That is why you cannot ask Jesus into your heart alone. He will ask, ‘Can I bring my friends?’ You will look at his friends and they will consist of the poor and marginalized and oppressed, and you will hesitate. But Jesus is clear: ‘Only if I can bring my friends.’”

And he continued with: “Ask yourself which Christian has most powerfully impacted the imagination and conscience of the modern world. A satin-suited, prosperous televangelist (who offers you your best life now)? Or a wizened old Albanian nun, who made herself the servant of the poorest of the poor, the dying people of Calcutta?”<sup>3</sup>

“When, Lord, when did I...?”

Jim Wallis of *Soujourners* tells of a morning when the volunteers who gathered early to prepare the food to feed the hungry homeless who were in a long line waiting on the outside of the building. One of the leaders asked one of the workers to pray and she prayed: “Jesus, help me to see your face when you come through the line.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the first time I heard that prayer it has influenced how I have offered prayer before rummage sales and dinners where persons not from the church have been invited. And I have had more than one person doing the serving comment on what a difference simply being reminded has made.

“When, Jesus, when did I...?”

Anne Lamott has a way of seeing the world a bit differently than most of us. She came to the faith later in life and mainly because of her experiences at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Marin County, California. She has dedicated two of her books to that congregation because of how instrumental they were in helping her find her way.

In her book *Traveling Mercies* she tells of one of the things that helped open her eyes. She told in the book of a time when a new member of that church was a man by the name of Ken Nelson. He was dying of AIDS. Despite the death of his partner of the disease Ken kept coming to the church week after week. The people of the church could tell he was also slowly dying.

Anne writes of a large, jovial black woman in the choir named Ranola – one of the most devout members of the church. There was no question that she kept looking at Ken out of the corners of her eyes and that she was a little standoffish. She’d been raised in the south by Baptists and had been taught that Ken’s way of life was an abomination. It was hard for her to see Ken as he was. Anne said that she thought Ranola and several other members of the church were afraid they might catch what Ken had. So they kept their distance. But Ken kept coming and coming anyway and finally most of the members were won over. During prayer time he would share that even in his decline he had felt the grace and redemption of God.

Well, on one particular Sunday morning the congregation began singing “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” The whole church was standing, except for Ken who was now too weak even to stand. And the church began to sing: “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” And Ranola, from the choir, kept watching Ken and then suddenly her face began to contort and tears came to her eyes and she left the choir, and she moved toward Ken, and she bent down and picked him up, lifting him like a white rag doll. Anne says Ranola held him next to her, as if he were her child as they all sang together: “His eye is on the sparrow and I know he cares for me.”<sup>5</sup>

“When, Lord, when did I...?”

You know, I caught a few glimpses of Jesus on Thursday down in fellowship hall. I saw him in many of those who came to eat a meal here. There were some elderly folks for whom the meal was an obviously welcome nutritious one; and there were those for whom we were the only family they know. There were several of our homeless friends. There were those families who came and helped serve and ate with all the others gathered in fellowship hall. There were those families who brought in dishes of food to share even though they had family waiting at home to eat. There were those unseen who spent hours making preparations so the rest of us could do what we came to do. There were those in charge that day who made leading look a lot like serving and who shared their hearts both with those who volunteered and those who came to eat and fellowship. There were

those who decorated and set the tables. And, there was the young woman who told me that she was there with her young daughter (oh, I'd guess about 10-years-old) that she was there with her young daughter because she wanted her to experience at a young age how important it was to help others. Yep, I saw Jesus a time or two on Thursday. His way of leading was obvious. He does indeed lead in a different way than the rest of the world.

“When, Lord Jesus, when did we...?”

Let us pray. The first part of the prayer is one printed in a Dear Abby column a few years ago. Again, let us pray: “O, Heavenly Father, we thank thee for the food – and remember the hungry. We thank thee for health – and remember the sick. We thank thee for friends – and remember the friendless. We thank thee for freedom – and remember the enslaved. May these remembrances stir us to serve – that the gifts to us may be used for others.”

Jesus, we do want to see you – to thank you. It's hard to imagine that we already have or haven't – that we daily have the opportunity to or not. We know that what you require of us will not be easy and we seek the conversion in our hearts which will enable us to see beyond our stereotypes, our images of those in need. We know our belief that others are the way they are because they want to be is an excuse for us not to have to respond. Break through our thick walls of hatred and suspicion, and wall of self pride. Open our eyes and hearts and minds to the needs that are all around us. Help us to follow your lead, O Lord, for it is in your name we pray. Amen.

1. William Willimon, “Where's Jesus?,” Pulpit Resources, October – December, 2008, p. 36.
2. Ibid., 34-35.
3. Peter Storey, “Let God Be God!,” With God in the Crucible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 154 as quoted in “Where's Jesus?,” p. 36.
4. “Where's Jesus?,” p. 36.
5. Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999) as quoted in “Where's Jesus?,” p. 35.