

Sermon: June 30, 2019 – Matthew 25: 31-40
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Is the Kingdom of Heaven more like...

An exclusive concert with your favourite musical artist, in a tiny, intimate little setting? Or,

A great big event – at a stadium or open field - with that same artist, and a huge audience singing and swaying to tunes you all know by heart?

Admittedly, both images are totally non-Biblical and they both have their limitations, especially if you don't like music. But in a way, I think they illustrate the two main ways that Christ's agenda in the world gets viewed.

Though it was never stated that way, I definitely grew up within the "small exclusive performance" metaphor. In the 7th chapter of Matthew (vv. 13-14), Jesus said "the road is wide and easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it...the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" and I took these words to heart. I wanted to be one of the good people who took the right road. The problem was, that also led me to be extremely judgmental of those who were more free-wheeling, and I became very hard on myself as well: at what point, I wondered, would I be "good enough" be invited to that intimate little gathering with God? While I don't think I ever thought that God wanted an elite group enjoying the new realm at the expense of others, I definitely pictured the new life promised by Christ as something kind of small and special.

The further I've gone on this walk of life, however, the more drawn I have become to the image of a great big gathering, to the point that, within this metaphor I imagine that it's not a ticketed event at all, you just need to show up: a happy, energetic crowd of all ages and stages and ethnicities and spiritual frameworks and sexualities and abilities, all rocking out side by side.

When I go deeper with these two images, one thing that is common between the two, is that the feature artist is delighted by it. Being in-close and intimate, close enough that you can look into each other's eyes and personally enjoy each other's company and feel each other's vibe, is something I yearn for with my God and I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual. And at the same time, the joyous, participatory, sing-along energy of the big, open group, is something that could not help but please the one who loves each of us individually and all of us together.

You may have noticed this morning, that the gospel reading was almost exactly half of what you have previously heard from the 25th chapter of Matthew. When hearing the whole thing, it's about Christ the judge, separating the saved from the damned as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The one group, those invited in to the new realm, are those who did good things without even realizing what they were doing; the other group, those sent off forever to a place you don't want to go, had turned their back on the needs of the world without even seeing what they were doing. No matter how you relate to this scene, there is a deep stream of emotional truth running through it: both the group that got welcomed in to paradise and the group that were sent off, were shocked beyond belief at the consequences of their actions. It's a really well-crafted bit of writing, whether we take it as a prophecy, or as parable.

But today, as we consider our journey toward becoming an Affirming Ministry, a place motivated by a heart for inclusion of all God's children, we'll look at only the first half of this parable/prophecy of Jesus, to help us clarify our positive motivation as followers of Jesus.

So let's hear these words again, this time from the Common English Bible:

³⁴ "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. ³⁵ I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a

drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.'

³⁷ "Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸ When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

⁴⁰ "Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.'

Starting at the end of this and working backwards, there's three main points I'd like to make:

- 1) Christ's full identification with the marginalized.
- 2) The motivation of those who helped the marginalized.
- 3) The who's and why's of those who needed support.

And please note here, I'm using the term "marginalized" to denote those who have been pushed to the edges by those who hold power. Living out there on the edge, is not an indication that there's anything "wrong" with you, just that somebody else has control.

Christ's full identification with the marginalized.

Hear these words from our Lord one more time: "when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me." Not, "it's as if you have done it for me." Not, "you've also scored points with me." No: "You have done it for me." Christ is not just in the room when kindness, support, or advocacy is offered to someone in need; Christ is the recipient. And you know what might even be cooler than that? When that inner voice in me has been activated, to reach out in love even if it's going to cost me, then it is Christ's presence that reaches toward that need, in a phenomenal show of holy unity. It's that dynamic of The Universal Christ that Father Richard Rohr (esp. pp. 13-14) writes of: Christ in us reaching out to Christ in the world.

Our natural state of being, is a state of belovedness by God, but there are so many factors, internal and external, that can shape our lives in exactly the opposite way. Life can be particularly cruel to those who don't fit in and those who are officially excluded by the laws and policies of the land, and if that gets layered on top of a home or neighbourhood environment where they were told that they wouldn't amount to anything, well, let's just say it makes it quite a bit harder to believe that God's love is for you. So whether you are on the receiving end, or the giving end, of acts of lovingkindness, you're part of a process of mutuality where your true identity as a child of God is reinstated, reinforced, reinvigorated. And at the risk of overstating it, this Affirming Ministry journey that we are on as a congregation, pushes us to build connections with those who are most likely to be under the greatest amount of exclusion. Anytime that an oppressed person's ability to fully participate is diminished, anytime they loses agency in their own life, it's a direct attack on the Christ-light within them...and we, as Christ's Church, are called to step up.

In this, we also hearken to our Jewish roots. Throughout Hebrew Scripture, the people of Israel are admonished to always look out for the needs of those on the edges of their society, defined as widows, orphans, and sojourners in their land (e.g., Exodus 22: 22). And this gradually got woven into beautiful traditions, like this one related by Rabbi Jordan Cohen (re Numbers 10):

"At Sinai, each of the tribes had been assigned a place on one of the four sides of the Tabernacle. When they begin moving, the rectangular encampment slowly unfurled, tribe by tribe, to become a long line of marchers, all headed together into the unknown.

“The Torah tells us that the last tribe in the convoy, the tribe of Dan, was given a special task: to be...“the ones who must collect everyone from all the camps” Although the people were to march in an ordered line, it was understood that some people would walk faster and some slower. Some would have to pause along the road and the line of marchers would surely fray. How could we make sure that no one would be left behind?

“Israel learned to configure itself so that nobody, including the most vulnerable in their community, would be lost or left behind. We must continue to learn that lesson today.”

The motivation of those who helped the marginalized.

In recent years, North American Churches have spoken a lot about “demographics,” and the importance of a community of faith resembling the community around it. As a guy who has done a lot of surveys and worked with a lot of statistics over the years, I know how much there is to be learned by taking a good hard numerical look at things, and am thankful for the work that Bill Millar did with you this spring to put some of these numbers in front of you.

I think it’s also really important, as we look at our Mission as a congregation in light of this scripture reading, to remind ourselves that demographic alignment isn’t the whole reason for reaching out in broader circles than we had been before. And with that, we hear these words (p.27) of Pastor Brandan Robertson, an LGBTQ activist serving an Evangelical congregation in San Diego:

“Inclusion is the burning heart of the gospel. The moment those who bear the name of Christ embrace exclusion in any form, they have resolutely stepped outside of Christianity....”

“Embracing the radical inclusion of the gospel of Jesus is the hardest thing that any human being can ever do. It forces us to confront our ego, our pain, and our privilege, sacrificing it on the cross for the good of our neighbour, our friend, and even our enemy. To follow that call is the most difficult thing in the world, yet it is precisely the call of Jesus to all those who seek to follow in his footsteps.

We reach out in acts of social justice and growing inclusiveness, as an expression of our fidelity to the ways of Jesus Christ, and as an expression of Christ alive in us. This isn’t peripheral or optional work, this, my friends is, as Brendan has said, “the burning heart of the gospel.” As we reach out in inclusion, and as we reach out financially to support the social justice work of the United Church, we do so in direct response to the love of Jesus.

The who’s and why’s of those who needed support.

One of the most frequent push-backs for any congregation considering the Affirming Ministry designation, is the danger inherent in “naming names.” If we name certain groups that we are most active in supporting, doesn’t that exclude others? If we place the needs of one group at the forefront, doesn’t that diminish the needs of others? This is the push-back that Black Lives Matter and Idle No More have regularly had to deal with: don’t all lives matter?

Well yes, all lives matter, but some lives are targeted a whole lot more than others, and that needs to be said out loud. And what impresses me so much with this scripture, especially when we read the first part on its own without the “fear of hell” part that follows, is that it does name names: I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison.

The importance of these problems being specifically named by Matthew, comes clearer when we add a “because” to each part. I was hungry, because you told me to get off my backside and get a better job. I was thirsty, because a multinational had bought up all the fresh water. I was a stranger, because everyone of my religion was expelled from my homeland. I was

naked, because my family sold me to a sex-trafficker. I was sick, and that doesn't need a because, I was just sick. I was in prison, because I raised my voice.

Yes, we are called to a life of broad response and broad inclusivity but we are also called to keep our eyes and our ears and our hearts open to the specific and timely needs of the world, in our backyard and across this globe. It's important to do that work that Rabbi Cohen spoke of, making sure nobody gets left behind. And it is crucial, to really listen to the voices of those who feel on the outside looking in, whether that is in relation to the Church or the community: if someone labels something that makes it harder for them to participate fully, that needs to be addressed. From my experience, this is already a tremendously open-hearted congregation, and we now have the opportunity to promise to ourselves and the community around us that we won't pull back from being even more open and informed and responsive, and we won't become a "closed" club in doing so. And I can honestly say, that ANYONE willing to roll up their sleeves is welcome, not just to participate, but to have a full say in how things are done.

Jesus spoke repeatedly about the Kin-dom of Heaven, the energy of love that is already emerging and yet always ahead of us. In that intimate kin-dom we know one another by name, even as God already knows us by name; in that ever-expanding kin-dom, our spirits grow in fullness as we learn from the holy gift of human diversity. May Christ around us, and Christ within us, come together as one. Amen.

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See also: Affirm United, <http://affirmunited.ause.ca/affirming-ministries-program/>

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